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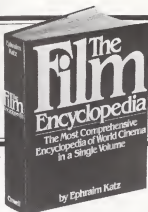


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**THE TWILIGHT ZONE**  
MAGAZINE

**With 10 Illustrations by D.W. Miller**

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# From the Editor . . .

*Night Cry* may scare you. It may amuse you. It may even delight you. But for those who demand that their literature serve a more practical purpose, this book has still another use:

It may save you a great deal of money.

Mind, I don't claim it *will*. I don't even claim that it's likely. The only difference this book will probably make in your finances is to leave you \$2.95 poorer. Still, it's conceivable—remotely conceivable—that the book could save you many times that amount.

How? Simple. Consider, for a moment, the nature of the stories we've selected. *Night Cry* is designed to keep your eyes open, your pulse pounding, and your imagination working overtime. It's intended to provoke, stimulate, and surprise.

In short, it's a do-it-yourself wake-up kit.

Now who, you ask, would ever need such a thing? *You*, quite possibly—if you're the sort of reader we had in mind when we put this book together. You may, of course, be a scholar, a librarian, or a thief; you may have picked this book up under the misapprehension that it was a child-raising treatise or a sex novel; you may even be a relative of one of the contributors. But I prefer to imagine you as a weary traveler just about to start a long bus journey, with an hour or two of boredom to contend with and no friend along to help you pass the time. The day is over, and the world beyond the bus window has grown dark; no use looking at the scenery. Nor would you care to get into a conversation with the stranger seated next to you, who's apparently failed to arm himself with any reading matter of his own and who, at this very moment, is glancing your way with an unsettling air of curiosity. (Maybe he's noticed this book's cover—a jarring photograph by Rosie Mackiewicz—or one of the ten original illustrations by D.W. Miller.)

You're feeling tired, but you don't want to doze lest you miss your stop; a mistake like that could turn out to be expensive. And while you're sleeping the stranger beside you (a rather unsavory sort, now that you look at him) is liable to pick your pocket.

No, you definitely don't want to risk falling asleep. Falling asleep could prove very, very costly.

That's where this handy little book comes in. It'll keep you wide-eyed and alert till you get home.

Of course, once you're home you *still* may have trouble falling asleep. Indeed, I can't think of a better bunch of waker-uppers and

keep-awakers than the tales assembled here—for many of them are set uncomfortably close to home.

Not all, of course; we've cast a wide net, bringing you terrors from the past and the future, from the maritime macabre of William Hope Hodgson's 1907 classic *The Voice in the Night* to the arid wastes of a contaminated post-Bomb U.S. in Kit Reed's *Frontiers*, from the Jet-Settily decadent Riviera of Jon Wynne-Tyson's *Mistral* to the filthy New York pavements of John Skipp's *Go to Sleep*, from the grimness and grotesquerie of Ramsey Campbell's *The Next Sideshow* to the savagely slapstick humor of Robert H. Curtis's *Harry's Story*. We've got terror on the highway (Robert Crais's *Weigh Station*) and another tale of terror on the high seas (George Clayton Johnson's *Sea Change*); we've got terror in a hotel (Dennis Delaney's *Windigo Country*), a restaurant (Mignon Glass's *A Chance Affair*), and a barroom (Ron Wolfe's *Tiger of the Mind*).

Most of our terrors, though, are of the more domestic sort—which isn't to say they aren't wild. You'll find terror on the farm (Lewis Shiner's *Blood Relations*), in the garden (Charles L. Grant's *Essence of Charlotte*), and even inside the house: a critic's nemesis (John Alfred Taylor's *When the Cat's Away*), a social worker's nightmare (Roger Koch's *Home Visit*), an alcohol-induced demon (Jere Cunningham's *The Red-Eyed Thing*), and a thoroughly demonic writer (Richard Matheson's *And Now I'm Waiting*, a prototype for the *Twilight Zone* episode "A World of His Own"). Two TZ Magazine prizewinners, Dan Simmons's *The River Styx Runs Upstream* and Jon Cohen's *Invitation to a Party*, make terror a family affair, while Katherine M. Turney's *Night Cry*—which gave us the title of this anthology—ushers terror right into the bedroom with you.

Pleasant dreams!

—TK

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*It lay in wait for him among the liquor bottles. But maybe if he stayed drunk, he'd be able to forget . . .*

# The Red-Eyed Thing

## by Jere Cunningham

Ray Simmons took a fiery drink from the newly opened bottle. Alcohol carved another slash of fire into his brain. He had to burn out the bad. He had to keep on drinking, because it was getting dark outside.

Dusk was collecting outside the trailer. The kitchen windows were purple rectangles covered with rusty screen. Simmons sat in the broken chair, becoming scared now despite the whiskey. He kept drinking hard. Now and again his eyes flicked at the cupboard where he kept his liquor. The flaking wooden door was slightly parted. A thin crack of darkness peered at him.

If the thing came out tonight, it would surely come out of there.

It would come slipping out into the trailer when the whiskey was fire inside his head. It would steal down out of the night — with red eyes and teeth that glittered in the dark, it would surely come. Knowing this, Simmons drank furiously, in a race to get drunk before darkness fell. Only total drunkenness could get him through this night.

A thin caterwauling cry came piercingly from the back room of the narrow trailer.

Simmons choked, flinched, and yelled out a terrified cry of his own into the Tennessee night. Then the weird sound tapered into the sobbing of an infant. Simmons cursed. It was only his daughter's baby. His teenaged daughter's bastard.

"That little shit," said Simmons thickly. He'd been badly shaken and humiliated for no good reason. Into the trailer's hallway he shouted roughly at his daughter: "Ronnie, you shut that kid's noise or I'll shut it for you!"

He was scared because he knew it would come after him, that red-eyed thing, would come out of the night like it had before. He had to get too drunk to see it when it came. He wallowed whiskey in remote cavities of his mouth, swallowed. He listened to the quiet motions of his daughter as she went hurrying to tend her little one. He felt guilty, and the guilty feeling made him see red.

If he could get drunk enough, or mad enough, he wouldn't get scared. Anger and stupor were the last refuges left to Ray Simmons by his forty years on earth.

The baby cried again.

It was almost totally dark outside now, in the woods around the Tennessee trailer park. The baby's wail made him lurch up into the murky hall, trembling, seeing red.

"Goddammit!" he yelled, "I'll fix that kid myself!"

His foot slipped on a wet spot of linoleum.

Simmons hit hard, gasping, rolling over. He was quickly up, elbow throbbing from the awkward way he'd had to fall to keep from breaking the bottle of Old Charter.

**I**n the tiny bedroom of the trailer, Ronnie could hear him coming. She heard her father's breath like tearing pieces of rag, then the tall, broken man reached the doorway. Ronnie, seventeen and unmarried, scooped her year-old boy to her milk-filled breasts.

Her father said nothing. He came at them with a strange sideways look, only his eyes shining in the growing dark. The utilities had been cut off months ago, her father spending everything from his monthly VA check on whiskey. His big hand swung at the baby. Ronnie twisted, taking the blow herself. She did a little sideways dance, seeing mind-glitter.

"Kid's too big for nursing them tits of yours," said Simmons. "Better haul ass and find you a man who'll pay to suck on you. Me, I'm sick of supporting both of you, and listening to that bastard's bawling all day and night."

Ronnie Simmons staggered but stayed on her feet, managing to dodge his fist this time, ducking with the baby cupped by her shielding body. She tried to speak to him the way she'd tried so many useless times before.

"Daddy . . . this ain't *you* . . . please!"

"Who the devil you think it is?" He laughed.

Her baby clung to her hungrily, seeking her chest, her warm liquid food—all that she could afford to give him. Her father growled like an

animal at the sight. Then he turned and was gone back through the hall, trailing acrid whiskey fumes, the hot vapor of his drunken breath.

*Oh God, thought Ronnie, help us tonight 'cause I got no place to go . . .*

She had gotten pregnant during summer vacation before her senior year. Her mother had left them when she was ten, disappeared without so much as a note. Her father was a drunk; worse, she couldn't help him any more than she could help herself. Holding her baby, Ronnie wept a bit in brief self-pity and in misery for her helpless baby. She looked down at the tiny marble-white face and arms that fed from her breast. She smelled the eggy infantness and felt hot bursts of rapturelike love. Her thoughts swam and drowned in the voidful fact that she had nowhere to go. And she was so scared, so scared of everything—if only I had guts enough to leave here, run away, take my chances out there . . .

Oh yes, she had tried that once, and had come crawling back in the first throes of labor. Her baby had been born here in this same dingy room.

Her boy suckled, murmuring.

"Shush, little Billy," she said, stroking the tiny white shape carved out of the blackness of the metal room.

At the other end of the trailer her father began singing the lyrics to an obscene song, maybe something from his Navy days overseas. She prayed to God that it wouldn't get bad tonight. It was getting worse and worse, and she didn't know what to do . . . if it gets worse, he might kill me, but I can't let him touch Billy, no way . . .

The night deepened, thickened, and Ray Simmons drank against the scrape of passing hours.

Once he thought he glimpsed the red-eyed thing, but it had been only his own face, oddly ratlike, in a glance at the mirror over the commode where he urinated. He laughed. He opened a new bottle. Something skittered, making him jump. And the baby was crying again.

*Oh God, Ronnie thought, clasping Billy again.*

Ray Simmons came stalking in drunken fury. When he left this time, Ronnie felt her mind go blank. Maybe her father was right, she thought for a crazy red-flamed second of pain.

"Gonna kill them two!" came her father's snarl from the kitchen. "Shut both them up permanently!"

In aching pain, Ronnie felt an impulse of hatred for her father, for her child, for herself, for the man who had made her pregnant, a man

In the living room, Ray Simmons lay on the floor and fought to sit up. His body was numb. But he realized that the noise that had wakened him was the slamming of the metal door of the trailer.

So his daughter had finally had guts enough to take off with her bastard. He'd finally got rid of the pair of them. He could have a little peace and quiet now. Drink in peace without them fussing and hollering and getting in the way.

He managed to sit up. An empty bottle clinked at the end of his left hand.

Simmons chortled in his victory. He swayed, standing, staggering toward the closet where full bottles of whiskey waited for consumption.

He stopped.

Had he heard that or imagined it? A scraping, like nails on glass?

All the things around him seemed to vibrate with the scratching sound. The stillness itself hummed, and he hurried on to the closet, sliding his drunken mass against the dark, flaky trailer walls. He was becoming antsy. He was realizing how much he was alone.

He laughed—*shit no, I like privacy!*

He came to the closet and fumbled with the knob.

But something skittered. He flinched back. It had sounded like something *inside* the closet. And that made him laugh at himself.

Still, his hand seemed to have a mind of its own. The fingers shrank from the doorknob.

He wanted a drink. He forced his fingers to tighten upon the knob. The effort of will further blurred his drunken vision in the dimness.

He was alone at last—reason to celebrate!

His hand gripped the knob. It turned and clicked. He pulled the warped door open an inch, then another. He pulled it the rest of the way with fury at his own stupid fear.

The fiercely grinning stare of the red-eyed thing perched among the bottles in the velvety dark closet fixed the eyes of Ray Simmons. He urinated; he could not move.

Before it sprang, Simmons had one last flash of thought, a tiny terror-ravaged fleck of wisdom—that the thing had waited, waited only for this time to come, when he, Ray Simmons, would at last have no one left who loved him, would at last be alone.

# Essence of Charlotte

## by Charles L. Grant

*One by one the townspeople died,  
as silently and mysteriously as  
petals dropping from a rose.*

The death of Aunt Charlotte was both unexpected and frightening. Unexpected because Warren thought she would live forever; frightening because he'd never known himself capable of such violence. And unlike many of his favorite suspense stories, there was nothing major about her existence (save, perhaps, for the existence itself) that fed his hatred. It was the small things, rather, that made being in the same house with her akin to eternity in a padded cell. Her love for the Brooklyn Dodgers, for example, resisting all rational attempts to prove to her that the Dodgers had been on the West Coast for over two decades; the dentures she enjoyed tossing at him when he walked into her bedroom; the room itself that had to be dusted every morning with clean rags; the motorized wheelchair that was to be oiled once a week at the local gas station . . . little things, irritating things, as well as her not *quite* interfering with his private life, not *quite* telling him how to run his modestly successful business, and not *quite* letting him know he wasn't exactly the best companion she had ever had.

Little things; and he hated her for them.

He knew it was unoriginal, both situation and response, but nevertheless he chafed.

After a few sessions with a therapist whose office was next to his own hardware-appliance emporium, Warren concluded that the focus of his unrest lay in Charlotte's *presence* rather than her deeds. She was an immensely overpowering woman of extraordinary energy, given to loud recitations of reminiscence, the vital statistics of the 1947 Dodgers, and not *quite* impugning Warren's masculinity, though he had more than enough women to slake his appetite. In her day she had been a radical feminist, had amassed a small fortune in gold and

bonds she passed on to charities for wayward girls, and had subtly browbeaten three husbands into early, grateful, graves. Though mobility had been corraled, her energy had not, when, fifteen years ago, her MG Classic had been struck by an oil truck, thus confining her to bed and wheelchair.

Familial guilt and ten years of little contact brought Warren to her when she asked.

There were also the roses.

Charlotte's passion was six beds of roses in her backyard; they were not perfect nor were they unusual, but Warren had an affinity for flowers of all kinds, and most of his spare time was spent in the garden, gloves properly on, cleaning the slightly raised beds of weeds and other dangerous intruders, snipping a blossom here and there for one of his lady-friends, or simply sitting there and watching them catch the late afternoon sun.

"You're worse a thorn in my side than they are," Charlotte told him at last; and when she demanded the entire yard be spaded over to make way for apple trees, her nephew knew the clichéd truth of straws and camels' backs.

Late on a Saturday when he should have been at the movies, he returned to the house, entered through the back door and made his way up the stairs and into her bedroom, where she was watching a film about Druids and black magic in suburban Los Angeles. She glared at him, sniffed, then grinned slyly, yanked and threw her dentures at him in one swift motion. Warren stood his ground.

"Have you done the roses yet, Warren Grogan?"

He reached under the bed where he knew he would find her favorite souvenir: a Louisville Slugger autographed by Andy Pafko.

"You're crazy, you wimp," she said, having seen enough cop films to know what the bat meant.

He admitted as how he probably was, at the moment.

"You won't get away with it."

He doubted he would be caught.

"You realize, of course, Warren, I won't take this passively. I have my ways, as well you know."

He shrugged his unconcern.

"You'll pay for this, you refrigerator freak."

He sighed. There was nothing for it but to stave in her skull.

Time compressed.

Without permitting himself to think, Warren gathered for himself

one of her Spanish shawls, a floppy-brimmed hat, and one of her shoes. In the garage he slid into the driver's seat of her specially equipped automobile (one she seldom used save for attending feminist rallies) and, with a few minutes' study, learned how to operate the curious-looking levers. He drove through the night to a side road previously unearthed, skidded the car twice to provide appropriate tire-marks, then jumped from the vehicle just before it slammed through a rotted rail fence and dove thirty feet down into a rocky, deep stream that was swift-moving and treacherous even in summer. The car landed upside down, its doors sprung open, and after it Warren tossed the hat, the shoe, the Spanish shawl, and, with a flourish worthy of a matador, her slightly cracked dentures.

It took him nearly a full day to walk home again without appearing on the main road.

Another few hours to clean up the bedroom and carry the body down into the kitchen. There he emptied a bottle of finely aged brandy and proceeded to be sure that a part of his aunt would lie safely beneath each of her precious rosebeds; six in all.

The following week was hectic: two severe thunderstorms that almost flattened the flowers, two sale days unprecedented in his entire business history, and several calls wondering if Charlotte would mind speaking at this-and-that meeting.

"When she gets back," he said, "but I don't know where she's gone."

His own call to the police, expressing concern.

Another call for worry.

And a third to demand action.

Ten days later, when he had cleaned out his store of every freezer in stock and considered it an omen, he was completely undisturbed when he arrived home at seven and discovered Detective Sergeant Standford waiting on the porch.

Warren decided then he could well have been an actor instead of a salesman.

Solemn-faced and apologetic, Standford told him of a pair of lovers who had found the wrecked car, and not finding the body despite a search by the state police. Warren was shocked, trembling as he identified the shawl and the shoe and the slightly cracked dentures; the hat, it appeared, had vanished with his aunt.

He was indignant when he was questioned about wills and finances, telling the detective that his aunt's fortune was long gone, and that the house had been in his name for the last seven years.

There were no enemies, real or imagined, and though Charlotte was an invalid she could take care of herself.

"She had her life and I had mine," he insisted; and Stanford left properly, though Warren caught him frowning.

Another week, and he decided it was time to resume his inactive social life. In this too he was successful, though there were minor problems at home: on Monday he found a pair of dead cats in the yard and had the ASPCA remove them, as well as the mongrel who seemed to have died on Tuesday; Stanford visited him on Wednesday and Friday, seemingly on business, though Warren knew better than that.

But there were also compensations: his women were affectionate (more so than ever since he played up his mourning), and the roses bloomed incredibly, their colors more vivid than he'd ever seen them before, their petals pure velvet, their stems thick and hardy. It was ironical and he knew it, and each night he toasted Charlotte for the sustenance she gave.

But in the middle of the third week he began to wonder.

He was shaken, more than even he would admit to himself, when a stereotypical dumb blonde he had bedded on Sunday was found to have passed away in her sleep during the following night. Somehow, Stanford found the connection, and Warren had to keep himself tight lest he pound the man's face in: "For God's sake, man, I only dated her once! And since she wasn't murdered, would you mind leaving me alone?"

That night, in the kitchen, he stared out at the garden.

The next weekend he was with a woman from a neighboring farm community; her obituary said she had died in her sleep.

Stanford showed up on a Saturday with a court order allowing him to probe the garden. Warren was manful about not butting in, but he stayed close to the garage and his sports car while the police made a few experimental forays into three of the rosebeds. He couldn't believe it when they didn't find a thing. Neither could Stanford, but he apologized politely and led his men away.

Sunday, Warren drove. No place in particular, but he had to have time to convince himself he wasn't crazy, the guilt wasn't undermining the stuff of his resolve. And when he returned home he went straight to the garden and stared at the roses—the beautiful roses whose cousins he had given, one blossom each, to each one of his ladies.

"You can't be *that* strong, Aunt Charlotte," he said.





The roses shivered in the cool evening breeze.

"It doesn't happen," he told his nondescript reflection in the bathroom mirror.

"Never in a million years," he muttered to the flowers on his way to work the next day.

"Science refuses to acknowledge this possibility," he said to the brandy.

Two cats, a dog, two women.

"But *I'm* out there every day," he said to the ceiling while he was trying to sleep, though he wouldn't put it past Charlotte to have thought of that one already.

He had to have a test.

He thought, then, of Standford, who kept dogging his shadow. But not only was it obvious, it was too risky as well. Instead, he clipped a yellow blossom and laid it on the chest of a derelict in the park; the paper two days later merely said that the dead man was "unknown."

"Good God," Warren said. "I'm King Midas of the Styx."

Time compressed further.

During the day Warren continued to operate his hardware-appliance business as though nothing untoward were happening. He was bright (though his assistants complained he was a little too bright), he was cheerful (those same assistants began rumoring about liquor in the morning, for breakfast), and he even found himself breaking a decades-old rule and actually dickering over the prices, allowing his increasing share of the customer market to think it was getting a better deal than advertised.

During the evening, however, Warren locked himself in his home, drew all the shades and lighted all the lamps, spent most of his time sitting in the kitchen staring at his reflection in the back door pane. On some nights he convinced himself he had been driven guiltily insane; on others he planned ways to use the roses to take care of those who irritated him, who beleaguered him, who beset him with competition both in television sets and lovely young women.

Not once did he return to the garden.

Until one afternoon in the middle of July.

He had been out the evening before, had had too much wine, and the resulting day-after headache resisted all the aspirin he'd been able to get down. Leaving the store in the care of his new manager, he drove slowly home, parked in the driveway, and was about to cut

across the lawn to the front door when he noticed that the gate in the cyclone fence between house and garage was ajar. He frowned, tugged nervously at his tie, and walked toward it. Stopped when he saw a man lying next to one of the rose bushes. He didn't have to move any closer—the monk's cap, the thick neck, the constrastingly slender waist: it was Standford.

*Good God*, he thought, and, with a glance at his neighbors' houses, he ran into the yard. And just as he did, Standford pushed himself onto his knees, wiped his hands against his trousers, and stared at him. He was without a jacket, his shirt open at the neck, and stained with dirt.

"I give up," he said.

Warren only just barely kept himself from saying, "Good."

"Listen," the detective said, still on his knees, "I haven't got a gun, my badge is home—and I think my sanity is, too—and all I want to do is figure out how you put the old lady in here without us finding her."

"You're insulting," Warren said, not bothering to hide a sly and smug grin. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I don't have a tape recorder, either. You know this is driving me nuts, don't you? You know I don't believe for a minute your aunt's body was washed away in that stream, not with all those rocks and bends to catch her even if she did die in that crash. Listen, Mr. Grogan, I swear to you—"

Warren didn't hear him, didn't hear the first time his last name was used. Instead he was staring at the roses, all the beautiful roses, wondering why the policeman wasn't dead. He almost laughed then, so relieved was he that roses didn't kill people, that no matter how farfetched, there were still such things as unpleasant coincidences.

He was so relieved, in fact, that he almost blurted a confession. He caught himself quickly, however, and blustered denials so hot and acidic that Standford quickly scrambled to his feet and virtually ran for the gate.

"And don't think I won't have your job for this harassment," Warren shouted after him.

Then, when he was sure he would be undisturbed, he wandered through the garden, touching the flowers, feeling their velvet, impressed as always by the sweep of their petals. *Good Lord*, he thought, *it's like being let out of jail*; and the irony of it filled his lungs with air, his eyes with delight, and he did laugh this time, so hard that his sides ached and his cheeks ached and his legs wouldn't

hold him. He stumbled once and automatically reached out a hand to steady himself, grabbed a thick-stemmed bush and yanked back his hand with a chuckling curse. Carefully, then, he pulled out the thorn embedded in his thumb and decided that tonight he would give a call to the mayor's wife; God knows she'd given him plenty of signs when she saw him on the street, came into the store.

The mayor's wife. Tall, busty, with long auburn hair that flared like fire when the sun was just right.

He grinned and shook his head at his daring, hurried into the kitchen, and began preparations for a meal that would give him all the energy he thought he'd need.

And he whistled as he undressed and showered, shaved and dried, came down in his smoking jacket to check on the roast.

And stopped on the threshold as though he'd been clubbed.

There, lying on the counter beside the flour tin, were his gardening gloves. Beside them the shears he used to trim all the roses. He looked down at his hand, back to the gloves, was moaning aloud when he crumpled to the floor.

*Damn, he thought, she got me again.*

It wasn't the scent after all, he knew. Charlotte in her whole life was never that subtle, never that clever. Which was why the police when they dug at the garden didn't keel over like flies, why Standford wasn't dead after poking around, why he himself had never succumbed to the roses.

The thorns.

Her revenge was in the thorns.

Of course, he thought as the room grew darker, the police would say he was overcome with guilt and had somehow killed himself as he had killed the others. They would concoct a story the press would believe, and that would be the end of it as far as they were concerned. They would never know that each time he worked in the garden, for a minute or an hour, he always wore his gloves out of lifetime habit; they would never know that the tiny prick in his thumb had been his undoing when he had been careless.

They would never know at all.

But he would . . . but he did.

What had his aunt said? He was a thorn in her side? He should have listened to her more often; he should have, but he didn't.

And as his smile grew more painful, and the darkness absolute, he realized that Charlotte was definitely not finished.

There were still all those roses, and every one of them had thorns.

# The River Styx Runs Upstream

by Dan Simmons

*It was good to have Mother home again.  
You could almost make believe  
she wasn't dead.*

*What thou lovest well remains  
the rest is dross  
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft  
from thee  
What thou lov'st well is thy  
true heritage . . .  
—Ezra Pound  
Canto LXXXI*

I loved my mother very much. After her funeral, after the coffin was lowered, the family went home and waited for her return.

I was only eight at the time. Of the required ceremony I remember little. I recall that the collar of the previous year's shirt was far too tight and that the unaccustomed tie was like a noose around my neck. I remember that the June day was too beautiful for such a solemn gathering. I remember Uncle Will's heavy drinking that morning and the bottle of Jack Daniels he pulled out as we drove home from the funeral. I remember my father's face.

The afternoon was too long. I had no role to play in the family's gathering that day, and the adults ignored me. I found myself wandering from room to room with a warm glass of Kool-Aid, until finally I escaped to the backyard. Even that familiar landscape of play and

seclusion was ruined by the glimpse of pale, fat faces staring out from the neighbors' windows. They were waiting. Hoping for a glimpse. I felt like shouting, throwing rocks at them. Instead I sat down on the old tractor tire we used as a sandbox. Very deliberately I poured the red Kool-Aid into the sand and watched the spreading stain digging a small pit.

*They're digging her up now.*

I ran to the swing set and angrily began to pump my legs against the bare soil. The swing creaked with rust, and one leg of the frame rose out of the ground.

*No, they've already done that, stupid. Now they're hooking her up to big machines. Will they pump the blood back into her?*

I thought of bottles hanging. I remembered the fat, red ticks that clung to our dog in the summer. Angry, I swung high, kicking up hard even when there was no more height to be gained.

*Do her fingers twitch first? Or do her eyes just slide open like an owl waking up?*

I reached the high point of my arc and jumped. For a second I was weightless and I hung above the earth like Superman, like a spirit flying from its body. Then gravity claimed me and I fell heavily on my hands and knees. I had scraped my palms and put grass stain on my right knee. Mother would be angry.

*She's being walked around now. Maybe they're dressing her like one of the mannequins in Mr. Feldman's store window.*

My brother Simon came out to the backyard. Although he was only two years older, Simon looked like an adult to me that afternoon. An old adult. His blond hair, as recently cut as mine, hung down in limp bangs across a pale forehead. His eyes looked tired. Simon almost never yelled at me. But he did that day.

*"Get in here. It's almost time."*

I followed him through the back porch. Most of the relatives had left, but from the living room we could hear Uncle Will. He was shouting. We paused in the hallway to listen.

*"For Chrissakes, Les, there's still time. You just can't do this."*

*"It's already done."*

*"Think of the . . . Jesus Christ . . . think of the kids."*

We could hear the slur of the voice and knew that Uncle Will had been drinking more. Simon put his finger to his lips. There was a silence.

*"Les, think about just the money side of it. What's . . . how much . . . it's twenty-five percent of everything you have. For how many*

years, Les? Think of the kids. What'll that do to—"

"It's *done*, Will."

We had never heard that tone from Father before. It was not argumentative—the way it was when he and Uncle Will used to argue politics late at night. It was not sad like the time he talked to Simon and me after he had brought Mother home from the hospital the first time. It was just final.

There was more talk. Uncle Will started shouting. Even the silences were angry. We went to the kitchen to get a Coke. When we came back down the hallway, Uncle Will almost ran over us in his rush to leave. The door slammed behind him. He never entered our home again.

They brought Mother home just after dark. Simon and I were looking out the picture window and we could feel the neighbors watching. Only Aunt Helen and a few of our closest relatives had stayed. I felt Father's surprise when he saw the car. I don't know what we'd been expecting—maybe a long black hearse like the one that had carried Mother to the cemetery that morning.

They drove up in a yellow Toyota. There were four men in the car with Mother. Instead of dark suits like the one Father was wearing, they had on pastel, short-sleeved shirts. One of the men got out of the car and offered his hand to Mother.

I wanted to rush to the door and down the sidewalk to her, but Simon grabbed my wrist and we stood back in the hallway while Father and the other grown-ups opened the door.

They came up the sidewalk in the glow of the gaslight on the lawn. Mother was between the two men, but they were not really helping her walk, just guiding her a little. She wore the light blue dress she had bought at Scott's just before she got sick. I had expected her to look all pale and waxy—like when I peeked through the crack in the bedroom door before the men from the funeral home came to take her body away—but her face was flushed and healthy, almost sunburned.

When they stepped onto the front stoop, I could see that she was wearing a lot of makeup. Mother never wore makeup. The two men also had pink cheeks. All three of them had the same smile.

When they came into the house, I think we all took a step back—except for Father. He put his hands on Mother's arms, looked at her a long time, and kissed her on the cheek. I don't think she kissed him back. Her smile did not change. Tears were running down Father's

face. I felt embarrassed.

The Resurrectionists were saying something. Father and Aunt Helen nodded. Mother just stood there, still smiling slightly, and looked politely at the yellow-shirted man, as he spoke and joked and patted Father on the back. Then it was our turn to hug Mother. Aunt Helen moved Simon forward, and I was still hanging onto Simon's hand. He kissed her on the cheek and quickly moved back to Father's side. I threw my arms around her neck and kissed her on the lips. I had *missed* her.

Her skin wasn't cold. It was just *different*.

She was looking at me. Baxter, our German shepherd, began to whine and scratch at the back door.

Father took the Resurrectionists into the study. We heard snatches of conversation down the hall.

"... if you think of it as a stroke ..."

"How long will she ..."

"You understand the tithing is necessary because of the expenses of monthly care and ..."

The women relatives stood in a circle around Mother. There was an awkward moment until they realized that Mother did not speak. Aunt Helen reached her hand out and touched her sister's cheek. Mother smiled and smiled.

Then Father was back and his voice was loud and hearty. He explained how similar it was to a light stroke—did we remember Uncle Richard? Meanwhile, Father kissed people repeatedly and thanked everyone.

The Resurrectionists left with smiles and signed papers. The remaining relatives began to leave soon after that. Father saw them down the walk, smiling and shaking their hands.

"Think of it as though she's been ill but has recovered," said Father. "Think of her as home from the hospital."

Aunt Helen was the last to leave. She sat next to Mother for a long time, speaking softly and searching Mother's face for a response. After a while Aunt Helen began to cry.

"Think of it as if she's recovered from an illness," said Father as he walked her to her car. "Think of her as home from the hospital."

Aunt Helen nodded, still crying, and left. I think she knew what Simon and I knew. Mother was not home from the hospital. She was home from the grave.

The night was long. Several times I thought I heard the soft slap



of Mother's slippers on the hallway floor and my breathing stopped, waiting for the door to open. But it didn't. The moonlight lay across my legs and exposed a patch of wallpaper next to the dresser. The flower pattern looked like the face of a great, sad beast. Just before dawn, Simon leaned across from his bed and whispered, "Go to sleep, stupid." And so I did.

For the first week, Father slept with Mother in the same room where they had always slept. In the morning his face would sag and he would snap at us while we ate our cereal. Then he moved to his study and slept on the old divan in there.

The summer was very hot. No one would play with us, so Simon and I played together. Father had only morning classes at the University. Mother moved around the house and watered the plants a lot. Once Simon and I saw her watering a plant that had died and been removed while she was at the hospital in April. The water ran across the top of the cabinet and dripped on the floor. Mother did not notice.

When Mother did go outside, the forest preserve behind our house seemed to draw her in. Perhaps it was the darkness. Simon and I used to enjoy playing at the edge of it after twilight, catching fireflies in a jar or building blanket tents, but after Mother began walking there, Simon spent the evenings inside or on the front lawn. I stayed back there because sometimes Mother wandered and I would take her by the arm and lead her back to the house.

Mother wore whatever Father told her to wear. Sometimes he was rushed to get to class and would say, "Wear the red dress," and Mother would spend a sweltering July day in heavy wool. She didn't sweat. Sometimes he would not tell her to come downstairs in the morning, and she would remain in the bedroom until he returned. On those days I tried to get Simon at least to go upstairs and look in on her with me; but he just stared at me and shook his head. Father was drinking more, like Uncle Will used to, and he would yell at us for nothing at all. I always cried when Father shouted; but Simon never cried anymore.

Mother never blinked. At first I didn't notice; but then I began to feel uncomfortable when I saw that she never blinked. But it didn't make me love her any less.

Neither Simon nor I could fall asleep at night. Mother used to tuck us in and tell us long stories about a magician named Yandy who took our dog, Baxter, on great adventures when we weren't playing with him. Father didn't make up stories, but he used to read to us from a big book he called Pound's *Cantos*. I didn't understand most of what he read, but the words felt good and I loved the sounds of words he said were Greek. Now nobody checked in on us after our baths. I tried telling stories to Simon for a few nights, but they were no good and Simon asked me to stop.

On the Fourth of July Tommy Wiedermeyer, who had been in my class the year before, drowned in the swimming pool they had just put in. That night we all sat out back and watched the fireworks above the fairgrounds half a mile away. You couldn't see the ground displays because of the forest preserve, but the skyrockets were bright and clear. First you would see the explosion of color and then, four or five seconds later, it seemed, the sound would catch up. I turned to say something to Aunt Helen and saw Mother looking out from the second-story window. Her face was very white against the dark room, and the colors seemed to flow down over her like fluids.

It was not long after the Fourth that I found the dead squirrel. Simon and I had been playing Cavalry and Indians in the forest preserve. We took turns finding each other . . . shooting and dying repeatedly in the weeds until it was time to start over. Only this time I was having trouble finding him. Instead, I found the clearing.

It was a hidden place, surrounded by bushes as thick as our hedge. I was still on my hands and knees from crawling under the branches when I saw the squirrel. It was large and reddish and had been dead for some time. The head had been wrenched around almost backward on the body. Blood had dried near one ear. Its left paw was clenched, but the other lay open on a twig as if it were resting there. Something had taken one eye, but the other stared blackly at the canopy of branches. Its mouth was open slightly, showing surprisingly large teeth gone yellow at the roots. As I watched, an ant came out of the mouth, crossed the dark muzzle, and walked out onto the staring eye.

*This is what dead is,* I thought.

The bushes vibrated to some unfelt breeze. I was scared to be there and I left, crawling straight ahead and bashing through thick branches that grabbed at my shirt.

In the autumn I went back to Longfellow School, but soon transferred to a private school. The Resurrectionist families were discriminated against in those days. The kids made fun of us or called us names and no one played with us. No one played with us at the new school either, but they didn't call us names.

Our bedroom had no wall switch but an old-fashioned hanging light bulb with a cord. To turn on the light I had to cross half the dark room and feel around in the dark room until I found the cord. Once when Simon was staying up late to do his homework, I went upstairs by myself. I was swinging my arm around in the darkness to find the string when my hand fell on Mother's face. Her teeth felt cool and slick. I pulled my hand back and stood there a minute in the dark before I found the cord and turned on the light.

"Hello, Mother," I said. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at her. She was staring at Simon's empty bed. I reached out and took her hand. "I miss you," I said. I said some other things, but the words got all mixed up and sounded stupid, so I just sat there, holding her hand, waiting for some returning pressure. My arm got tired, but I remained sitting there and holding her fingers in mine until Simon came up. He stopped in the doorway and stared at us. I looked down and dropped her hand. After a few minutes she went away.

Father put Baxter to sleep just before Thanksgiving. He was not an old dog, but he acted like one. He was always growling and barking, even at us; and he would never come inside anymore. After he ran away for the third time, the pound called us. Father just said, "Put him to sleep," and hung up the phone. They sent us a bill.

Father's classes had fewer and fewer students and finally he took a sabbatical to write his book on Ezra Pound. He was home all that year, but he didn't write much. Sometimes he would spend the morning down at the library, but he would be home by one o'clock and would watch tv. He would start drinking before dinner and stay in front of the television until really late. Simon and I would stay up with him sometimes; but we didn't like most of the shows.

Simon's dream started about then. He told me about it on the way to school one morning. He said the dream was always the same. When he fell asleep, he would dream that he was still awake, reading a comic book. Then he would start to set the comic on the nightstand,

and it would fall on the floor. When he reached down to pick it up, Mother's arm would come out from under the bed and she would grasp his wrist with her white hand. He said her grip was very strong, and somehow he knew that she wanted him under the bed with her. He would hang onto the blankets as hard as he could, but he knew that in a few seconds the bedclothes would slip and he would fall.

He said that last night's dream had finally been a little different. This time Mother had stuck her head out from under the bed. Simon said that it was like when a garage mechanic slides out from under a car. He said she was grinning at him, not smiling but grinning real wide. Simon said that her teeth had been filed down to points.

"Do you ever have dreams like that?" he asked. I knew he was sorry he'd told me.

"No," I said. I loved Mother.

That April the Farley twins from the next block accidentally locked themselves in an abandoned freezer and suffocated. Mrs. Hargill, our cleaning lady, found them, out behind their garage. Thomas Farley had been the only kid who still invited Simon over to his yard. Now Simon only had me.

It was just before Labor Day and the start of school that Simon made plans for us to run away. I didn't want to run away, but I loved Simon. He was my brother.

"Where are we gonna go?"

"We got to get out of here," he said. Which wasn't much of an answer.

But Simon had set aside a bunch of stuff and even picked up a city map. He'd sketched out our path through the forest preserve, across Sherman River at the Laurel Street viaduct, all the way to Uncle Will's house without ever crossing any major streets.

"We can camp out," said Simon. He showed me a length of clothesline he had cut. "Uncle Will will let us be farmhands. When he goes out to his ranch next spring, we can go with him."

We left at twilight. I didn't like leaving right before it got dark, but Simon said that Father wouldn't notice we were gone until late the next morning when he woke up. I carried a small backpack filled with food Simon had sneaked out of the refrigerator. He had some stuff rolled up in a blanket and tied over his back with the piece of clothesline. It was pretty out until we got deeper into the forest preserve. The stream made a gurgling sound like the one that came from Mother's

room the night she died. The roots and branches were so thick that Simon had to keep his flashlight on all the time; and that made it seem even darker. We stopped before too long, and Simon strung his rope between two trees. I threw the blanket over it and we both scabbled around on our hands and knees to find stones.

We ate our bologna sandwiches in the dark while the creek made swallowing noises in the night. We talked a few minutes, but our voices seemed too tiny, and after a while we both fell asleep, on the cold ground with our jackets pulled over us and our heads on the nylon pack and all the forest sounds going on around us.

I woke up in the middle of the night. It was very still. Both of us had huddled down under the jackets, and Simon was snoring. The leaves had stopped stirring, the insects were gone, and even the stream had stopped making noise. The openings of the tent made two brighter triangles in the field of darkness.

I sat with my heart pounding.

There was nothing to see when I moved my head near the opening. But I knew exactly what was out there. I put my head under my jacket and moved away from the side of the tent.

I waited for something to touch me through the blanket. At first I thought of Mother coming after us, of Mother walking through the forest after us with sharp twigs brushing at her eyes. But it wasn't Mother.

The night was cold and heavy around our little tent. It was as black as the eye of that dead squirrel, and it wanted in. For the first time in my life I understood that the darkness did not end with the morning light. My teeth were chattering. I curled up against Simon and stole a little of his heat. His breath came soft and slow against my cheek. After a while I shook him awake and told him we were going home when the sun rose, that I wasn't going with him. He started to argue, but then he heard something in my voice, something he didn't understand, and he only shook his head tiredly and went back to sleep.

In the morning the blanket was wet with dew and our skins felt clammy. We folded things up, left the rocks lying in their rough pattern, and walked home. We did not speak.

Father was sleeping when we got home. Simon threw our stuff in the bedroom and then he went out into the sunlight. I went to the basement.

It was very dark down there, but I sat on the wooden stairs with-

out turning on a light. There was no sound from the shadowed corners, but I knew that Mother was there.

"We ran away, but we came back," I said at last. "It was my idea to come back."

Through the narrow window slats I saw green grass. A sprinkler started up with a loud sigh. Somewhere in the neighborhood, kids were shouting. I paid attention only to the shadows.

"Simon wanted to keep going," I said, "but I made us come back. It was *my* idea to come home."

I sat a few more minutes but couldn't think of anything else to say. Finally I got up, brushed off my pants, and went upstairs to take a nap.

A week after Labor Day, Father insisted we go to the shore for the weekend. We left on Friday afternoon and drove straight through to Ocean City. Mother sat alone in the rear seat. Father and Aunt Helen rode up front. Simon and I were crowded into the back of the station wagon, but he refused to count cows with me or talk to me or even play with the toy planes I'd brought along.

We stayed at an ancient hotel right on the boardwalk. The other Resurrectionists in Father's Tuesday group recommended the place, but it smelled of age and rot and rats in the walls. The corridors were a faded green, the doors a darker green, and only every third light worked. The halls were a dim maze, and you had to make two turns just to find the elevator. Everyone but Simon stayed inside all day Saturday, sitting in front of the laboring air conditioner and watching television. There were many more of the resurrected around now, and you could hear them shuffling through the dark halls. After sunset they went out to the beach, and we joined them.

I tried to make Mother comfortable. I set the beach towel down for her and turned her to face the sea. By this time the moon had risen and a cool breeze was blowing in. I put Mother's sweater across her shoulders. Behind us the midway splashed lights out over the boardwalk and the roller coaster rumbled and growled.

I would not have left if Father's voice hadn't irritated me so. He talked too loudly, laughed at nothing, and took deep drinks from a bottle in a brown bag. Aunt Helen said very little but watched Father sadly and tried to smile when he laughed. Mother was sitting peacefully, so I excused myself and walked up to the midway to hunt for Simon. I was lonely without him. The place was empty of families and children, but the rides were still running. Every few minutes there would

be a roar and screams from the few riders as the roller coaster took its steepest plunge. I ate a hot dog and looked around, but Simon was nowhere to be found.

While walking back along the beach, I saw Father lean over and give Aunt Helen a quick kiss on the cheek. Mother had wandered away, and I quickly offered to go find her just to hide the tears of rage in my eyes. I walked up the beach past the place where the two teenagers had drowned the previous weekend. There were a few of the resurrected around. They were sitting near the water with their families; but no sight of Mother. I was thinking of heading back when I thought I noticed some movement under the boardwalk.

It was incredibly dark under there. Narrow strips of light, broken into weird sorts of patterns by the wooden posts and cross-braces, dropped down from cracks in the walkway overhead. Footsteps and rumbles from the midway sounded like fists pounding against a coffin lid. I stopped then. I had a sudden image of dozens of them being there in the darkness. Dozens, Mother among them, with thin patterns of light crossing them so that you could make out a hand or shirt or staring eye. But they were not there. Mother was not there. Something else was.

I don't know what made me look up. Footsteps from above. A slight turning, turning; something turning in the shadows. I could see where he had climbed the cross-braces, wedged a sneaker here, lifted himself there to the wide timber. It would not have been hard. We'd climbed like that a thousand times. I stared right into his face, but it was the clothesline I recognized first.

Father quit teaching after Simon's death. He never went back after the sabbatical, and his notes for the Pound book sat stacked in the basement with last year's newspapers. The Resurrectionists helped him find a job as a custodian in a nearby shopping mall, and he usually didn't get home before two in the morning.

After Christmas I went away to a boarding school that was two states away. The Resurrectionists had opened the Institute by this time, and more and more families were turning to them. I was later able to go to the University on a full scholarship. Despite the covenant, I rarely came home during those years. Father was drunk during my few visits. Once I drank with him and we sat in the kitchen and cried together. His hair was almost gone except for a few white stands on the sides, and his eyes were sunken in a lined face. The alcohol had left innumerable broken blood vessels in his cheeks, and he looked

as though he were wearing more makeup than Mother.

Mrs. Hargill called three days before graduation. Father had filled the bath with warm water and then drawn the razor blade up the vein rather than across it. He had read his Plutarch. It had been two days before the housekeeper found him, and when I arrived home the next evening the bathtub was still caked with congealed rings. After the funeral I went through all of his old papers and found a journal he had been keeping for several years. I burned it along with the stacks of notes for his unfinished book.

Our policy with the Institute was honored despite the circumstances, and that helped me through the next few years. My career is more than a job to me—I believe in what I do and I'm good at it. It was my idea to lease some of the empty school buildings for our new neighborhood centers.

Last week I was caught in a traffic jam, and when I inched the car up to the accident site and saw the small figure covered by a blanket and the broken glass everywhere, I also noticed that a crowd of *them* had gathered on the curb. There are so many of them these days.

I used to have shares in a condominium in one of the last lighted sections of the city, but when our old house came up for sale I jumped at the chance to buy it. I've kept many of the old furnishings and replaced others so that it's almost the way it used to be. Keeping up an old house like that is expensive, but I don't spend my money foolishly. After work a lot of guys from the Institute go out to bars, but I don't. After I've put away my equipment and scrubbed down the steel tables, I go straight home. My family is there. They're waiting for me.



# Weigh Station

## by Robert Crais

*The road to hell was a six-lane highway,  
and the damned all drove big rigs.*

His was the only car in either direction, three-thirty a.m. on the Antelope Valley Freeway, driving north above L.A., heading for a week at Lake Tahoe, then a new life in San Francisco. He'd made the early start to be sure of arriving at Tahoe before dark.

The Zee Turbo had been a present to himself. After the Final Judgment of Dissolution had come through and the divorce from Maggie was finally a reality, after he had quit his job at the small Pasadena law firm where he'd worked during their entire six-year marriage, after he'd applied to and been — hallelujah! — hired by one of the most prestigious law firms in San Francisco, after all that, he'd said what the hell and bought the car, even though he could barely scrape together the down payment. The monthly installments were horrendous, but given a year up at the new firm at the new salary, they'd seem like chicken feed.

David Hamill caught a flash of light in the rearview mirror. He tensed and scanned the road ahead. There was a sign coming up quick around a bend in the highway:

PALMDALE	12
LANCASTER	18
EDWARDS AFB	24

— and then it was gone, racing to somewhere far behind. Palmdale and Lancaster were to the north, Edwards Air Force Base to the northeast. He would have to pass through Palmdale and Lancaster to make the 94 connection in Mojave for Tahoe.

David checked the rearview mirror again, but the light was gone, hidden behind the mountain. He laughed to himself. Why the sudden tension over another headlight? Dumb.

Then the headlights were back. David watched them, unconsciously giving the Datsun a little more gas. They were growing larger and coming fast.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed another sign, this one much smaller than the last: TRUCK ROUTE AHEAD. ALL TRUCKS EXIT.

lowered the window for the breeze and found the night air of the high desert country cold and sharp. He had gone almost another mile when he edged the Datsun onto the shoulder — *twenty, fifteen, ten, five* — where it rolled to a stop and was still.

"Shit."

He sat silently a moment, cursing a lemon that would get five miles to the gallon when it was supposed to get thirty, then gave a loud Bronx cheer. Only thing he could do was try to hike up the road to the weigh station, or, if he was lucky, the truck stop he'd gambled on.

There was a flashlight in the glovebox. He dug through suitcases until he found a jacket, then got out of the car. He put the flashlight in his back pocket and locked the doors. He looked up and down the road. There was nothing in either direction. Helluva way to start a new life, he thought. Wouldn't Maggie laugh. Wouldn't she laugh, indeed.

He kicked the Datsun, turned away, and started up the truck route.

He was almost at the top of the mountain, on a stretch of road that snaked back and forth in the canyons, when he heard a truck's rumble echoing up the mountain behind him.

Thank God.

David stopped and had to bend over, propping his hands on his knees. His legs were cramping, and muscle stitch ripped at his side. He'd walked almost three miles of uphill grade; six years of sitting on your butt in a law office did not keep one lean and hard. But here was a chance not to walk anymore.

When the truck's lights were coming directly toward him, David began flagging his arms. He found himself praying sincerely for a merciful driver.

The truck drew closer.

Stop, David said.

Closer.

*Please stop!*

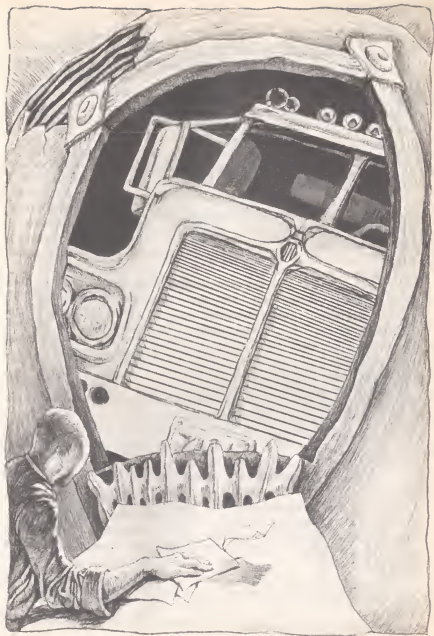
Closer still.

*I don't like it out here!*

The air brakes hissed and the truck — this one a Mack — slowed. The rig rolled to a stop a hundred yards past him.

Thank God, again! David forgot the cramps and broke into a trot. Halfway there, a spotlight popped on, washing him in light. He stopped for a moment, surprised, then began walking toward the light.

"Hey," David called, "think you could give me a lift up the road?" The driver was obviously a wary man, so David gave it his most reassur-



ing courtroom voice.

"That your Zee back there?"

David was close enough now to raise a hand and block out most of the spotlight's glare. He could make out a guy in his mid-thirties, with shaggy hair and a cowboy hat, looking down from the cab of the truck.

"Sucker crapped out on me," David said, after a nod. "I took the truck route because I figured I could make the weigh station or a truck stop or something before I ran out of gas."

There was a long pause, so David said, "Guess I figured wrong."

After a moment, the spotlight clicked off and the cab door nearest David cracked open. "Tough break. Hop on up, an' I'll give you a lift."

The driver's name was Mitchelson and he had a hard, gritty hand with grease under the nails. He smelled of cigarettes and too many hours on the road, but his eyes weren't bugging out, and he gave enough of a damn to stop. Local radio was giving the early morning farm reports and a low hiss came from a dormant CB. It was good to be off the truck route and with another human being.

"Tell you what," Mitchelson was saying, "I've got a coupla Pabsts in the fridge back there if you want one. Just look under that pile of clothes." He flipped a switch and the sleeper in the rear of the cab lit up.

David dug out the two beers and passed one to Mitchelson. The beer was cold and good and slaked the scum from his throat, and David finally just shook his head and laughed about it. Mitchelson seemed to understand, and pretty soon he was laughing, too.

"What's up ahead?" David asked.

"Well, somewhere up ahead, this baby loops back to the main freeway—that'd be around Palmdale, I'd guess."

David shook his head, swallowing beer. "Not what I meant. Is there a truck stop or an all-night gas station where I could get some help?"

"Beats me."

David smiled. "I thought you guys knew the road like the backs of your hands."

Now it was Mitchelson's turn to smile. "You watch too much tv."

"All I need is a place where I can phone the Triple A."

Mitchelson shrugged. "If you drive a road, you know it. Me, I never made this run before. I do mostly short-haul work between Arizona and Nevada."

David grudgingly accepted it and sipped the Pabst. If there was no place to use a phone, he was really up a creek. "A little off course, aren't you?"

"More than a little. The company stuck me on this run because the

transfer driver piled it up just outside of Phoenix." From the tone in Mitchelson's voice, David could tell he didn't like it. "Damn idiot took it into a culvert doing seventy. Tried to pass a slow freight."

David nodded. "Had some clown almost blow me off the road just before the car went out on me. It was like I wasn't even on the road. The sonofabitch would've rolled right over me to get where he was going."

"Lots of guys like that," Mitchelson said. "Seems to be more and more of 'em. Guys who give the trade a bad name."

"Seems the legal profession doesn't have the market cornered on assholes." David glanced at his watch, wondering now if he'd make Tahoe before midnight. If he had trouble finding a phone, and if the Triple A took its good time getting out to him. . .

"You can see the change at the overnight truck stops more than anywhere else," Mitchelson said. He didn't seem to notice David's preoccupation, or, if he did, didn't mind. David thought it must be lonely driving a long run by yourself.

"What change?"

Mitchelson thought about it a moment before answering. "I used to look forward to staying overnight at these places, see. You'd meet up with guys you hadn't seen in years—mostly transfer guys, the long-haulers—and there'd be card games and drinking a lot of beer and shooting the bull and whatnot."

"Now, a guy'll walk in you never seen before and you'll never see again, and you can tell by the look on his face he doesn't care. It's like they're not seeing *you*, these guys, like they get out of their trucks and they go through the motions, but they're still seeing the road and what's at the end of it and that's all they care about."

David looked over at Mitchelson, thinking about the expression on the driver who'd blown past him. "Know what you mean."

"Then they're back in their rigs, and burning up the highways. For what?" He looked at David. "That's what kills me. For what?"

"So they can try to beat a slow freight and pile it into a culvert," David said.

Mitchelson looked at him for a long moment, then nodded and looked back to the road. "Yeah, so they can pile it into a culvert, so old Danny Mitchelson has to finish carrying their load to Palmdale."

Palmdale! David turned in the seat. "You're going through to Palmdale?"

"That's what the voucher says."

That's it! That's it! He didn't need the Triple A. "Mind if I ride all the way through with you?"

"Giving up on the truck stop?"

"What I'm giving up on is a sixteen-thousand-dollar automobile that leaves you stranded in the middle of the desert. Palmdale's big enough to have a Datsun dealership."

Mitchelson took a slug from his beer and smiled. "You gonna make 'em eat it?"

"I'm gonna make 'em eat it," David said. And make them hand over a free rental so he could hit Tahoe by midnight. He smiled to himself, pleased with the new plan, and enjoyed the rest of his beer. It was one of the better beers he had ever drunk.

As they rounded the curve, there was a glow like an aerie of light in the mountains. "Is that the weigh station?" David asked.

Mitchelson nodded, then downed the rest of his Pabst in a long, steady pull. He crumpled the can, rolled down the window, and tossed it out. "Look, I'm gonna have to let you out on account of the company might have a checker here. But before I get on the scales, I'll stop and kill some time by taking a piss or something so you can catch up. After I get off the scales, I'll slow down enough for you to hop aboard again, okay?"

"No problem," David said. *Anything* was worth getting to those bastards at the dealership.

When they were about half a mile from the station, Mitchelson said, "Okay, here we go. Do it fast." Then he shot a glance in the rearview, downshifted, and pegged the brakes. David swung out of the cab, hit running, and shouted back, "See you on the other side!" The diesel roared and accelerated away.

The weigh station was a squat cinderblock building festooned with bright sodium-vapor lamps. It looked to be painted tan or grey, but David couldn't be sure. The front of the building was glassed and shadowed; pale green and yellow lights glowed through the windows. Inside, there would be a coffee pot, maybe a tv, and a couple of guys who liked the late shift. A sign to the left of the building said ALL TRUCKS MUST BE WEIGHED. Arrows pointed to two scale lanes. Each lane had a red light/green light suspended above it. The lights in both lanes seemed to be continually green. The two scales were directly in front of the glass side of the building.

The Mack eased into the scale lane closest to the building and stopped. David reached the rear of the building as Mitchelson was climbing down from the cab. The rear wasn't lit except for the backwash from the lamps dotting the front and sides of the station. There were rocks, a couple of trash barrels, and overgrown clumps of desert brush and

tumbleweed. He took it easy, picking his way carefully so as not to make any noise and alert whoever was in the building.

David stayed in the shadows until he was a hundred yards past the building and the scales. The door on the side of the station opened and Mitchelson appeared. He stood in the doorway, holding the door open, a confused expression on his face. Then he let the door swing closed. Instead of going back to his truck, he went to the rear of the station.

David moved out a few paces, keeping low. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he thought Mitchelson might be looking for him. He raised his arms and waved, but the trucker didn't see him. After a few seconds, Mitchelson walked around to the front and stood before the dark windows. Abruptly he turned and walked to the truck. David gave a long, whistling sigh of relief when the diesel started. The big truck eased slowly up to the scales, then gave a slight lurch. For an instant, just an instant, when the truck lurched, David thought he heard a scream.

It was probably a stuck air brake.

Then the diesel was revving and the gears were being shifted and the huge truck was lumbering forward. Finally, he thought. David moved to the edge of the shadows and waited.

The truck accelerated, faster and faster, gearing up, digging in. Hey, David thought; then, "Hey!" he yelled. "Sonofabitch!" Mitchelson wasn't going to stop! The bastard wasn't going to stop! David sprang up and ran to the road, screaming "Hey, goddammit! Wait! Wait!" But then the Mack was passing him. In that last moment, he tried to see into the cab, to make eye contact with that bastard Mitchelson. But Mitchelson, masked in shadow, was only staring straight ahead, looking far up the road. Son of a bitch, David thought. He stood in the middle of the lane, watching the disappearing lights of Mitchelson's truck. Only thing to do now was forget the dealership and go back to the weigh station like he'd originally planned and use their phone—

That's when it hit him, and he spun around. There weren't any cars parked at the station. *Then how the hell do the bastards get to work?* Something icy raced over his scalp and he felt a metal-on-metal sound begin in his throat. Then the answer came to him, and he thought, *Their wives drop them off, that's how.* The something icy went away and was forgotten.

Disgusted, he walked back to the weigh station. Imagine, Mitchelson. And he had liked the guy, too.

When he reached the door, he paused, drawing up short just before taking the handle. Something made him uneasy. There had been no movement, no sound of any kind from the place. Maybe a shadow

should have moved behind the glass. Maybe one of the little lights he could see through the glass should've blinked or altogether disappeared as something within blocked it out. But there was nothing. Nothing.

Without knowing why, he wanted to turn away and run back to the Zee. From there, he could walk to the Antelope Valley Freeway and get off this godforsaken truck route; he could walk all the way into Palmdale, if that's what it took.

Silly. "You're being silly," he said. On the other side of this door was a phone and a couple of friendly guys and some hot coffee and a radio running the late ball scores. Silly. He opened the door.

"Hello."

No answer.

He leaned forward. "Anybody home?"

Still no answer. He took a tentative step inside. There was no radio running the late ball scores, no tv with the early morning Creature Feature, no smell of coffee. The place was cold and musty. Through the smoked glass he saw the scales and signal lights that seemed forever to be green. There were no sounds. He let the door close with a soft *skqreel* behind him.

"I ran out of gas back down the road . . ." He said it to the rear of the place, thinking someone might be in the john. Again, there was no answer.

The station was filled with electronics. The walls, from floor to ceiling, front to back, were lined with banks of dials and displays and pale green and yellow lights that burned steadily without blinking. There was a console stretching across the room. It looked like the consoles he'd seen in pictures of the NASA Mission Control Center in Houston. Behind it were two worn, dark green secretarial chairs, the seat material broken from much use.

Whatever he was looking at, whatever this *was*, David knew it couldn't be for weighing trucks. He moved cautiously to the counter, suddenly not wanting to be heard, suddenly feeling very much afraid.

He touched the top of the console and his fingers came away with dust. Tiny gossamer spiderwebs clung over toggle switches and button panels and dial faceplates. The two chairs were cocooned with a soft pelt of webbing. David took a deep breath, let it out slow and easy. Whatever this place was, no one had sat in those chairs in a long while. A long, long while.

He moved around the console and saw that there was printing beneath the buttons and switches. He pulled the flashlight from his back pocket and brushed the spiderwebs and dust away from the words.



ENERGY DRIFT—SPIN (NEG.)—CLARITY—COMMITMENT. He didn't understand what he read. Commitment? He moved to another part of the console. REAL TIME—OBJECTIVE TIME—POINT DISTORTION. *Jesus!* What the hell was going on here? PERSEVERANCE—EMOTIONAL ACCORD—PLEASURANT GRADIENT. He had no idea what it meant. He just knew—he was *positive*—that he wasn't supposed to be here.

He took a last incredulous look around, then backed out of the building. David glanced up at the night sky and the stars and then over toward Edwards. The air base must be only six or seven miles away. Maybe there was a connection. Edwards tested top secret government stuff. Maybe *this*, whatever it was. A shudder raced down his back and then up again. Goosebumps raised the small hairs on the back of his neck and arms. All the exotic technology somehow reached deep, raking silicon-chip claws against a part of him that was primitive and preferred dark, dank caves to spun silica and phosphor dots.

Only thing left to do was to try to find some help on the main highway. He turned away from the weigh station and, walking fast, headed into the middle of the nearest scale lane. The fast walk became a trot. And, without understanding it, without even *wanting* to understand it, because feeling it was enough, the trot became a run.

There were the scales. Eighteen-wheeler-sized rectangles in the floodlight-washed pavement before him. He wondered why they were outlined in bright red candystriping. Then, as he remembered pictures of rocket nozzles and jet exhaust pipes and huge suction ducts and other things that were dangerous and so wore red candystriping as a warning, he realized the answer to his own question. He groaned, and tried with every muscle and nerve in his body to stop, to veer away, but it was too late. One of his feet hit the scale. His last thought was of the old children's rhyme:

*Step on a crack, break your mother's back!*

There was the hot, oily sound of one piece of metal being rubbed with too much force against another piece of metal.

It was his scream.

**I**t was nine-eleven in the morning when the truck appeared, climbing the winding route to the weigh station. Another Mack, this one was hauling huge machine parts strapped atop a flatbed trailer.

David stood on the far side of the scales, anxiously waiting. He'd been at the weigh station for almost five hours, and for five hours had been resisting a screaming urge to start away on foot. But here and here alone, where the trucks slowed, would be his only chance to hop a ride.

A ride would be necessary.

He thought about the scale.

There had been the flash, and then the pulling and tearing of what could have been the changing of dimensions or the altering of synapse and brain wave or the replacement of soul. It could have been any of those things, or a thousand others. In that micro-micro-second of flash and distortion, he had seen through the eyes of Mitchelson and the hollow-eyed driver in the Kenworth and scores of others, all staring across dashboards and steering wheels and hood ornaments onto the nighttime highway. And when the flash and bit of scream were over, finished, he had been left *different*. Part of something, yet part of nothing; warm, yet cold; satiated, yet hungry.

Not long after, the hunger began to grow.

He'd thought about standing on the scale again but somehow knew that only the *next* weigh station, the one further up the road, could feed the hunger.

For a while, he had wondered the why and what and who of it; but again, somehow, the why and what and who, just like vague thoughts of a sports car and a place he had been going and a woman named Maggie, were unimportant. The weigh station simply *was*.

Besides, other things were important now. Things like getting to the next weigh station. Things like the hunger, which was now eating at him, burning in his gut, causing his bowels to knot and quiver.

It had been almost five hours. He was behind schedule.

The Mack slowed to a stop before the scales, then rolled slowly forward. The driver stared at David with masked, empty eyes.

The truck touched the scales, and there came the metal-on-metal sound. The truck lingered on the red-outlined rectangle. Then the engine revved and the truck accelerated off the scale, showing no intention of stopping.

David jumped upon the truck's running board as it passed, opened the door, and climbed inside. The driver didn't look at him. He was staring up the road at something far away.

"This is the truck route," the driver said.

David nodded, feeling his eyes pull forward, until he, too, was staring up the road. "How long to the next weigh station?"

After a moment, the driver said, "Just over three hours."

David straightened in his seat, straining forward, unblinking, wishing he could see the next weigh station.

"Hurry," he said.

# The Next Sideshow

## by Ramsey Campbell

*Step right this way for the Mirror Maze!  
You'll never be the same.*

As Gray passed the locked kiosk, it began to rain. Water came pattering through the layers of autumn leaves still clinging to the trees; the dark lake plopped. Beyond the park, the auras of the tower blocks sparkled.

There was no use hurrying home. His key was locked in, and his wife wouldn't be home for at least half an hour; that was why he'd decided to stroll in the park. The kiosk rumbled like a drum. Its scrawny arch offered no refuge. Perhaps if the rain became too heavy he could shelter beneath the trees.

At least the hectic glistening made the paths more visible. The rest of the park was black and smudged as a soaked drawing. Clouds massed overhead, darkening the night; they looked close and thick as foliage. Once he glimpsed the lights of the park road he would have his bearings.

Underfoot the path felt less like concrete than mud. Had the gardeners been moving earth, or had he missed his way? He stumbled onward, blinking; rain poured down his forehead into his eyes. Was that a shelter ahead, among the streaming trees? But there was no such building on his route home. Then he heard rain scuttling on metal. The dark shape was a caravan.

There were several, huddled like beasts beneath the trees. Raindrops traced veins through the dirt on their dim windows. Had the caravans any right to be there? They were robbing him of shelter. As he trudged past they rattled like maracas.

One pair of curtains was untidily parted. Beneath it, light slumped on the drowned twitching grass, and illuminated a section of a notice. Gray made out a few words: MAZE, FREAK SHOW, WELCOME. The letters squirmed under trickles of rain. Had the notice been laid

ing. If the mirrors had been cleaner — if the huge bobbing face had been less blurred — he wouldn't have felt uneasy at all.

The only exit from this passage was to the left. He must be near the end now; there couldn't be much more of the maze packed into the building. Again he had to turn several times, always left. His skin felt hot, and grubby as the mirrors. The closeness of distorted flesh oppressed him.

Ah, here was a longer passage. Dim flesh squirmed at the far end; perhaps that mirror concealed the exit. He hurried toward it, glancing aside at the riot of distortions that filled the walls. When he peered ahead again, the glass at the end of the passage was blank.

The mirror must reflect only beyond a certain distance. Perhaps it was a final attempt to confuse victims of the maze. He strode at the mirror, ready to push it aside. Then he faltered. Dusty though it was, there was no doubt that it was a sheet of plain glass.

What had he seen beyond it, peering through? Nobody could look like that. Of course, there must be mirrors beyond; he'd seen a distant reflection of himself. Where was the exit? Irritably mopping his forehead, he turned left.

"You've never been in a maze like this."

He whirled. Flesh unfurled fatly around him. The voice was behind one or another of the mirrors: somehow the proprietor, or whoever had been in the paybox, had crept close to him. Gray kept his lips tight, though a pulse was leaping in his throat. He refused to admit he'd been startled.

"Not quite what you expected, is it? It's the same in all the side-shows. Never judge too hastily."

The tone of the soft voice seemed clearer now: oily, gloating. Was the proprietor trying to distract him, make him lose his bearings, because of what he'd said about freaks? All right, so the sight of deformity made him more uncomfortable than he'd admitted to himself: so what? He glared at his watch. He was damned if he'd ask the way out. He could bear ten more minutes.

He dodged through alcoves of mirrors: left, always left. Eyes peered at him from separated blobs of flesh; a tangle of disfigurements writhed around him. The buzzing of the unsteady lights seemed louder, as though a hive had burst. The relentless distortions made him dizzy. He had to halt and close his smarting eyes.

Surely he'd walked through the whole of the building by now. Was the proprietor sneaking mirrors into new positions, for revenge? Five minutes, then Gray would ask the way out — and by God, if the

man didn't tell him at once he'd smash his way through.

As Gray opened his eyes, he saw movement at the end of the passage. Good God, what had it been? Himself, of course: he must have shifted inadvertently. Surely that was a parody of himself beneath the grime on the glass. Beyond the passage, to the left, he heard a click.

"These are the last of the mirrors," the voice said.

That must mean that he was nearly free. Gray headed for the voice, almost running. Overhead the buzzing jerked close; light twitched in the mirrors. He avoided glancing at the glass at the end of the passage. On the left a mirror had swung back. Shaking his head to clear it of dizziness, buzzing, oppression, he stepped through the gap.

The room within was smaller than a cell. An even dimmer light crawled feebly in a tube, stuttering. He peered at the rectangles of glass on the walls. Surely they weren't mirrors. Were they paintings?

"These are what I started with." The voice was beyond the mirror at the far end — the exit, presumably. "A payment for services, that's what they were supposed to be. You meet strange folk on the road."

Gray faced one panel. No, it wasn't a painting; it was too luminous. Yet he could see the sun setting behind mountains. On one slope a small town bristled with turrets. How could the town glow more profoundly than the sky, as though with an inner light?

The image was receding. Momentarily he felt that he was watching it not through dusty glass but through a veil of mist. He stepped forward in pursuit, and the glass turned muddily opaque at once. Some kind of optical trick, nothing more — but he turned quickly to the other panels, into which images were retreating. Before he could reach any surface, all the glass was grey and dull.

"One more," said the voice.

One sheet of glass was not opaque; the one at the far end of the cell. He advanced, thrusting out his hand to shove it aside. His hand bulged in the mirror, pumped up like a balloon whose neck was his wrist. The glass made stumpy pillars of his legs, and dragged his head like soft wax halfway down his arm. His face . . . he couldn't take any more distortions; he felt giddy and nauseous. His eyelids fell shut.

When he heard the click, his eyes opened. The mirror had moved, exposing dimness. He stumbled quickly forward. He hadn't realized how dizzy he was; he could hardly walk or focus his eyes. But he must get out while he had the chance. Why? What was he escaping?

As soon as he was through, the mirror clicked shut. But it didn't feel like earth or concrete underfoot — more like a patchy carpet. He blinked his eyes toward focus. Good God, he was in a caravan! He opened his mouth to protest; he struggled to regain control of his lips.

"That mirror made me what I am," the voice said.

Gray staggered about, trying to keep his balance, to raise his head. Suddenly he realized that it wasn't only dizziness that troubled him; the caravan was moving. It was crowded; he heard squirming in corners and on bunks. As his eyes slowly focused, he saw something like a hand holding a hand-mirror toward him. In its oval, the reflection of the caravan's interior was undistorted. By God, they'd better let him out; they wouldn't distract him with any more nonsense. But as he glimpsed the hand that he was thrusting out to ward off the mirror, he began to moan. He had passed through the final distorting mirror in more, and worse, ways than one.

# Sea Change

## by George Clayton Johnson

*Lucho had a horrifying secret—  
even more horrifying than he himself realized.*

*I imagine, if you will . . .*

The white mists roll in like solid things and bump gently against the tropic coasts. The heavy gulf waters suck at the planking of a small launch that lies at anchor near the shore.

Doc Howard squints anxiously toward the land and wipes his sweaty palms on his dirty dungarees before taking a quick pull at a pint whiskey bottle.

"Come on," he mutters. "What's keeping you?"

Doc is a thin wisp of a man with a grey complexion and the shaking hands of a chronic drunk. Life hasn't been good to him; it has eaten away at his confidence and dignity until only the shell of the man is left.

There is a shrill squawk, and Doc starts up. His eyes swivel wildly to the small cage that hangs from the superstructure near the entrance to the cabin. In the cage sits a brightly colored parrot. Seeing the source of the sound, Doc lets out his pent-up breath. The parrot claws at the cage and clucks noisily.

"Water alive with police cutters, and Al ashore with a load of guns, and me struck here with you," mutters Doc. "What do I know about boats and running guns?"

The parrot screams shrilly, and Doc wipes at his damp forehead with his sleeve. "Come on, Al. Come on!"

Suddenly he stiffens. There is a sound of distant rifle fire and a crashing in the brush near the moored boat. Doc leans over the side. "Al?" His voice is a hoarse whisper. "Al? That you?"

Legs churn water; there is a thump against the side of the boat. Assisted by Doc, Al Lucho, small-time hoodlum, climbs noisily over

the rail onto the deck.

"Get that anchor up!" he commands sharply. "I'll start the engine. *Move!*"

Doc casts him a frightened look and leaps for the anchor chain. With the aid of a small winch he begins to pull anchor. The chain piles up on the deck as the anchor rises.

The engine bursts to life, and the launch begins to pull away from the shore. Over the sounds of the engine echo several rifle shots; small, ugly holes appear in the side of the boat above the water line.

The parrot squawks loudly as the rifle fire grows distant.

The craft safely under way, their pursuers left behind, Al locks the wheel in position and comes on deck. He sees the parrot in its cage, and a wide smile breaks over his pinched face. He chuckles. "What's the matter, Conchita? Things get too rough for you?" He sticks his finger through the wire bars of the cage and strokes the parrot's head. It slashes at his finger. He jerks his hand back and puts the injured finger in his mouth.

Doc joins him. "One of these days that bird is going to take that finger off you. Ever hear of parrot fever?"

Al springs to face him, his face ugly. "She's my bird, ain't she?"

Doc becomes conciliatory. "Sure, Al. Sure."

"I want to let her bite me, it's my business. I been bit before, and it always healed fast enough."

As Doc turns away, Al reaches out and grabs him. He looks at Doc's trembling hands, then leans forward suspiciously and sniffs Doc's breath.

"Now Al . . ."

"You been at the bottle again!"

"It was just a little one, Al."

"I risk my neck leaving you here to cover for me, and you hit the bottle the minute I'm out of sight." He cuffs Doc roughly and shoves him against the rail. "Where's the bottle?"

"Please, Al . . ."

He twists Doc's arm. "Come on, rumdum. *Where?*"

Doc cries out in pain and gestures toward a pile of rope. Al shoves him aside, finds the bottle, and raises his arm to throw it over the side.

Doc is abject. "Please, Al. You know how I get when I need a drink . . ."

Al looks at him contemptuously. "Suffer!" he says harshly. He flings the bottle into the mist. Ignoring Doc, who clings weakly to the



rail, he goes to the parrot's cage. "See what I'm saddled with, Conchita? A human sponge. He smells the cork of a bottle and he comes apart. I'm lucky the boat was waiting at all."

Talking to the parrot seems to cheer him somewhat. He grins a gargoyle grin and begins to play with the bird. He purses his lips and makes cooing, clucking sounds. Carefully he pets the brightly colored head and is delighted when the bird suffers his attentions.

Doc raises his head. "Al?" he says softly.

"Yeah? What do *you* want?"

Doc's voice has a slight whine to it. "Did you get the money?"

Al's laugh is without humor. "See what I mean, Conchita? A booze-hound with no guts, but he's ready at the payoff." He mimics Doc's voice. "*Did you get the money?* You want a laugh, Conchita? He may look like a human whiskey bottle to you, but our brave partner here used to be a doctor. Yeah. A regular doctor with a white coat. To hear him tell it, he was a regular Mayo Clinic until he started drinking up the medicinal alcohol."

His tone has turned ugly, and now he shifts to face Doc. Concealed by the movement of his body, his hand curls around a marlin spike racked near the rail.

As he takes a step forward, Doc sees the weapon and draws back apprehensively.

"The way I figure it, rumdum, you're more of a liability than an asset. Why should I split with you? It was me that located the guns and set up the deal."

Stalked by Al, Doc scrambles toward the fantail of the boat. "Please, Al, please . . ."

Al smiles murderously and lunges forward, the spike raised to strike. Doc covers his head with his arms and dodges to the side. His legs make contact with the anchor-release lever.

With a loud rattle, the chain begins to pay out, whipping the deck like a great iron snake. Carried by his own momentum, unable to stop, Al is hit by it and loses his balance. His arms flail out as he goes down. He screams as the moving chain catches him and slams him against the gunwale. He screams again.

Shocked, Doc looks at Al lying there on the deck.

Al writhes from side to side, his arm cradled against his chest. "My hand! It hurts!"

"You haven't got a hand anymore, Al. The chain took it off."

Al's eyes widen. "No! No!" He collapses.

For a long moment, Doc looks at the still form at his feet. The

parrot claws the cage and squawks shrilly.

"You tried to kill me, Al. If I was half smart I'd put you over the side. You're an animal. A savage. I've never heard you give anybody a kind word. You like hurting people. You hate everyone and everything. You haven't a single redeeming feature, unless it's the way you feel about that ugly bird. Only . . . only I can't do it. What you said a while ago is true. I *was* a doctor. Not a very good one, maybe, but it was my job to save lives, not to take them. You wouldn't understand that, would you, Al?"

The parrot screams harshly as Doc begins to drag Al toward the cabin. Once inside the tiny compartment, he levers Al onto the single cot. He rummages underneath and brings out a black bag full of shiny instruments and bottles. Fumbling in the bottom of the bag, he takes out a pint of whiskey, breaks the seal, takes a healthy belt, and recaps the bottle. He goes through Al's pockets, takes the thick wad of money, and puts it in his own jacket pocket. Then, taking a hypo from the bag, he fills it from one of the small bottles and injects it in Al's arm before setting to the job of cleaning and bandaging.

When Al is resting easily, Doc goes topside. For a time he looks off at the shifting mists to obscure the water from view. He listens to the drum of the engines, and after a while he sleeps.

Time passes. How long it has been Doc doesn't know. Something wakens him. He sits up quickly and looks about, but sees nothing. He listens. There is only the sound of engines, water, and the screams of the parrot. Blinking, Doc rises and goes forward to have a look at Al. As he bends over the still form on the bed, Al opens his eyes.

"Easy," says Doc. "You haven't got a right hand anymore, but if you take care of yourself till we get to shore, you'll be all right."

As he pulls back the blanket to have a look, his face goes pale. His eyes widen with horror.

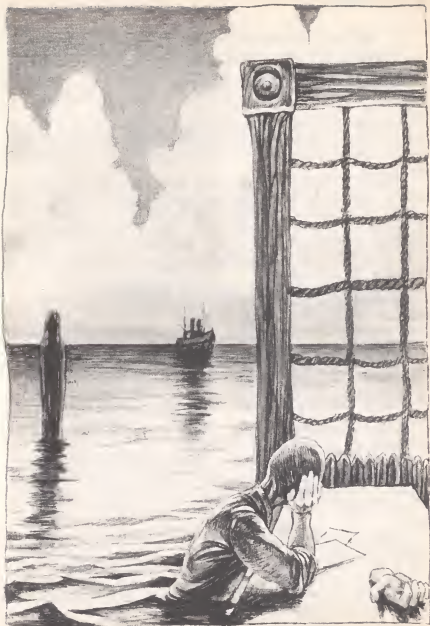
"What is it?" Al asks fearfully.

Doc's voice is full of shocked disbelief. "Your hand . . ." Al tries to rise.

"It's impossible!" says Doc huskily. "Your hand. *It's grown back!*"

And so it has. Except for a light white line around Al's right wrist, his hands are whole and perfect.

A miracle has occurred, and Doc is slow to recover from his wonderment. He examines the hand. "Flex your fingers."



Al, not quite comprehending what is going on, does as he is told. "Fantastic," says Doc. "I saw it severed myself. I trimmed the flesh and put on the bandage."

Al has never seen Doc like this before. "Maybe you were seeing things. They say that's what the juice does to you when you drink too much of it."

"I know what I saw," says Doc. "When you came at me with that marlin spike . . ." He breaks off, remembering that Al has tried to kill him. Al stirs uncomfortably, but now Doc's attention is centered on the miracle.

"Look," he says. "This has never happened before in medical history. There are certain worms that have the ability to regrow lost portions of themselves. You can cut one of them in two pieces, and each piece will become a separate worm. They're called planaria. Certain forms of marine life have it, too—but never a human." He looks at Al wildly. "Do you know what this means? Do you know what a secret like this is worth?"

At the mention of money, Al becomes attentive.

"If this thing could be isolated—if it could be reduced to a formula and synthesized, it would be worth a fortune. The man who could grow back arms and legs and fingers could name his own price."

"What are you getting at, Doc?"

"Somewhere inside your blood or your genes is a secret. The man who pries it loose will make medical history. I could be that man."

"Now wait a minute . . ."

"I could take samples of your blood and run a series of tests. And if it isn't in the blood—"

"If you think I'm going to let a rumdum like you stick knives in me, you're out of your mind."

Doc is fired by the vision. He can see himself dressed in white, surrounded by admiring medical men, a figure to command respect and awe. "You would have killed me if it wasn't for the anchor chain," he says. "I saved your life. You were bleeding to death. You owe it to me."

"I owe you nothing," Al raises himself up on the cot and puts his hand in his pocket that held the money. It is gone. "The money! It was in my pocket . . ." His voice takes on a dangerous edge.

But Doc is beyond caring about the money or Al's anger. He sees his future slipping away from him. "Forget about the money," he cries. "This is more important than money. I want to experiment . . ."

Al begins getting to his feet. "You want to get Al Lucho on a

table so you can cut his throat, is that it? You want to cut him up and make serum out of him?"

And now Doc knows that he has lost, that Al has no intention of cooperating in his schemes. His hand closes over a club-length of wood lying on a ledge in the cabin.

"But Al, you've got to let me. I won't let you refuse. You've got no right—" Hysterically he swings the club at Al, who wards off the blow; and then Al is upon him. Grabbing Doc by the throat, he slams him against the bulkhead and begins to squeeze. Doc claws at the fingers and writhes weakly.

Suddenly there is a sound on deck—a heavy sound like stumbling footsteps. Al becomes rigid, listening. "What was that?" His fingers loosen slightly. He cocks his head. "It sounded like someone out there."

Doc wrenches free from the choking fingers. He gasps for air, sobbing. Again they hear the sound of dragging footsteps. Doc's eyes flick from side to side. He looks at Al with sudden horror. "The hand!" he says. "What happened to the hand?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember what I told you about the worms? How you can cut one in two and each part grows into a separate worm?"

"I don't—"

"Two pieces. Two worms. Don't you see?"

And now Al understands what Doc is getting at. But he doesn't want to believe it.

Doc takes advantage of his momentary confusion. His eyes go to the slim scalpel that lies on the built-in table by the cot. Continuing to talk, he edges toward the knife.

"The hand, Al. It was caught in the anchor chain. It's out there on the deck somewhere, the bilges maybe, washed by seawater. You've never looked at seawater through a microscope, Al, but I have. It's aswarm with microbes and bacteria. It's like a rich soup filled with living things."

He has Al going now, and he is much closer to the scalpel. His hand trembles above it, fingers reaching.

"Can you picture it lying there, taking substance from the sea? Growing? Changing? You take one worm and cut him in two parts, and he becomes two worms. You were cut in two parts, Al, and one of the parts grew a hand."

"No! It's impossible . . ."

"What did the other part grow, Al?"

"Shut up!"

"What's out there on the deck, Al?"

But now Doc has gone too far. In his terror, Al whirls on him and sees Doc's fingers closing about the scalpel. He lets out a yell and jumps forward. For a frantic moment they fight for it; then Al, the stronger, wins out. He wrests the blade from Doc and plunges it downward. Doc collapses with a groan.

Al breathes heavily, looking down at the body. Then he raises his head, nostrils quivering. He hears the strange stumbling sound again.

Holding the scalpel, he goes to the door of the cabin and peers into the darkness. Nothing. Opening the door cautiously, he edges through it with the blade in front of him. He takes two stealthy steps, listening intently.

Suddenly a hand comes out of the blackness and clamps onto his shoulder. He gasps and whirls. Before him in the darkness is a huge hulking figure . . .

An involuntary cry bursts from Al's lips as he sees the figure's face. It is himself, his eyes and lips and bone structure. But it is not quite the same. There is an unfinished quality about the face, as though done by a hasty sculptor who's missed some essential character lines.

Stunned, paralyzed with fright, Al backs away clumsily. He has forgotten the knife in his hand as the figure moves after him. Its hands are like loose claws. Al feels the rail against his back, and then it gives way. He feels himself falling, falling . . . Then there is blackness.

The figure turns away from the rail. It enters the cabin and removes the bundle of money from Doc's pocket. It carries Doc's body on deck and dumps him over the rail. Chuckling evilly, it begins to thumb through the bills.

There is a shrill cry, and the figure looks up. The parrot, Conchita, is clawing its way about the interior of the cage.

A snarl crosses the figure's face. It wrenches the cage from its moorings, raises it high, and casts it into the darkness. It smiles then, and goes forward to steer the boat toward the distant port.

# Blood Relations

## by Lewis Shiner

*There was a monster on the farm—and perhaps it was a member of the family . . .*

From somewhere inside the barn came a dripping noise. It made Denny feel strange because it sounded like rain, yet he was sitting outside in the warm evening, watching the moon come up through the East Texas pines.

The moon was big and orange-colored and looked like a pumpkin with little smears of dirt on it.

"Dennnnny!"

"Coming," he called. He didn't want to go inside. When he went inside it meant the day was almost over, and he didn't want it to end. It was the last day of summer, which made him a little sad, but it was his birthday, too. They'd given him a puppy, and he wanted to stay outside and make the day last forever.

Today he was thirty-five years old.

Running hot water into a sticky saucepan, Anne took another look out the window. Denny was still by the barn, watching the moon come up, and she wondered if she was going to have to go out and lead him to the dinner table by his hand.

It had been a good day. Even Tom had seemed to relax a little, and he and Denny had played together in the Indian summer sunshine like a couple of idiots—

She almost bit herself. A flush of shame went down her neck and she had to splash some water into her eyes. It was one of those words—like "dummy" and "fool" and even "monster"—that she couldn't use anymore. Denny had only been with them a few weeks now, since Mom had died, and in the years she'd been away from him she'd lost the habit of watching her words. So far she hadn't slipped in front of him, but Tom nearly had, more than once, and the worst part had been the tension it left behind.

When she looked out again Denny was shambling back toward the house, slump-shouldered and staring at the ground. Good. At least he remembered enough to come inside.

Then he turned again and started for the door of the barn, and her heart sank. It was no use.

"Tom?" she called. "Can you get Denny for me? He's headed for the barn."

*Sure, Tom thought. I'd love to. What else do I have to do but play hide-and-seek with your half-witted brother?*

Guilt clenched his stomach like a cold hand, and he shut his eyes. "Okay," he said. "I'm going."

*What's happening to us?* he wondered, as he pulled on his boots and stamped his tired feet down into them. *Guilty all the time, everything coming to pieces around us . . .*

As he came around the side of the house he could see Anne framed in the yellow light of the kitchen window, but no sign of Denny.

"He went into the barn," came Anne's voice. "I'm putting supper on the table now."

"Okay."

A chicken cut across his path, and for the hundredth time he wondered what he was doing there. He was no farmer, yet for the last three weeks, nearly a month now, he'd been tending two horses, four cows, a dozen chickens, and one tired old sow. The university in Nacogdoches had let him set up his schedule for afternoon classes, leaving his mornings free for the chores, but the hour's drive into town seemed to eat up the last of his free time.

It was harder on Anne, of course. She had to do the gardening, cooking, half the repairs, and take care of Denny besides. But then, it was her farm. It was her mother that had left it to them, and her brother was part of the package.

*And there I go again,* Tom thought. *Trying to squirm out from under the responsibility.*

In the pasture behind the barn one of the horses whickered nervously, and the other night sounds of the farm all went quiet.

Suddenly Tom caught the odor of the swamp that lay a mile or so south of the house, and he wondered if it affected the animals the same way it did him. He believed in history, not in superstitions, but something about that swamp was frightening, even in daylight. "The glades," the locals called the place, and like the Florida Everglades it was full of birds and snakes and even alligators. But the locals talked about other things that lived in the swamp, things out of their rightful place and time. Like the bug that one of the neighbor boys claimed to have found, a dragonfly-shaped thing over a foot long.



But of course Tom had never seen it; and when he'd asked what had happened to the thing, the boy'd told him a cat had eaten it. "Made the cat sick as all get-out," the boy had said, laughing, and Tom had just assumed the kid was having him on.

But nothing accounted for the smell of that place, or the way the animals got when the wind blew up out of the south.

Tom put his hand on the barn door and stopped. A snuffling sound was coming from inside, and all of a sudden he didn't want to open it.

He pulled on the handle. The hinges groaned, and Tom peered into the darkness of the building. "Denny," he said softly. He could still hear the snuffling, and behind it another noise, a steady, persistent dripping sound.

"Denny?" he said again. For some reason his voice was barely coming out of his throat. He slapped at the wall with his left hand, searching for the light switch, and finally found it. The floodlight high in the ceiling came on, blinding him, and as his eyes slowly cleared it looked like everything was all right. He saw Denny standing over one of the low shelves at the side of the barn, facing away from him.

Then he saw what Denny was looking at, and saw the blood dripping onto the dirt floor and the puddle of it under Denny's feet.

"Oh my God," Tom said. "Oh my God . . ."

Denny was upstairs, still crying. Anne could hear his sobs through the floor and wanted to go comfort him, but she wasn't sure she could think of anything to say. She was afraid she would start crying herself—or worse yet, screaming—and not be able to stop.

She couldn't believe that Denny had killed the dog. Tom hadn't gone into details, but she knew from the look on his face that it had been bad, something savage and brutal, and Denny simply wasn't capable of it. Tom had said he didn't believe it either, but the doubt in his voice had dropped a wall between them.

But if Denny hadn't done it, then who—or what—had?

She lay in bed with the covers pulled up to her chin. The breeze that pushed and rustled at the curtains was still warm, but she was wearing a woolen nightgown in spite of it. She had a book in one hand, but her eyes wouldn't focus on the page, and she knew as well as Tom did that it was there for a defense, an excuse not to talk to him. He lay with his back to her now, the set of his shoulders and the depth of his breathing telling her he was not really asleep.

The sheriff hadn't had time to come out. Three area high schools

had football games scheduled that night, and unless it was an emergency he needed every man he had to keep the drunks off the roads. That was his excuse, anyway, though Anne believed he simply hated to make the long drive out to their farm. First thing in the morning, he'd said.

Anne put the book down, went into the bathroom, and closed the door. *There's a simple explanation*, she told herself, turning on the faucet. The sound of running water relaxed her, and she left it on while she looked through the medicine cabinet for some Valium. *Rats, maybe*, she thought.

But Tom said it had been killed somewhere else and carried over to the shelf. Rats didn't do that.

She found the pills and took two of them, washing them down with a long drink. Her reflection stared back at her from the door of the medicine cabinet, tired and brittle-looking.

*Thirty-two*, she thought, patting compulsively at the split ends and spikes of white coming out of the straight blond hair. *I look forty, at least*. Her eyes were bloodshot and swollen, as if she had been crying for hours instead of fighting to keep from it.

It had been mistake coming to the farm, she knew. Everything was too fragile—the marriage, Tom's ego, Denny's temper, most of all their bank account. They could have sold the farm to pay for some kind of hospital for Denny, with maybe enough left over to send Tom to England for the research he'd always wanted to do.

She turned the water off, started to reach for the light cord, then opened the door first. She wondered how she was ever going to sleep again.

The scream woke Tom instantly. He came up out of a dream of desolation and fear, where he'd been wandering through a bleak, alien landscape. He was ravenous, but everything he put in his mouth turned sour and putrid and he couldn't swallow it.

He woke so hard that his legs kicked into the wall, and he rolled over to see Anne as a huddle in the sheets, scooting away from him. Her breath was coming in short gasps, making a *huh, huh, huh* sound.

He reached for her automatically, knowing she was still half asleep and wrapped in a nightmare. "It's okay," he told her. "There's nothing there."

"Yes there *is*!" Anne whispered. "Look!"

Her hand shot toward the window, and Tom felt like the bed had

dropped from under him. *Christ, what if—*

He got his legs under him and turned to the window. For an instant he thought he saw something, but when he blinked he couldn't see anything but the shadow of the tree.

"You're dreaming," he said. "You're just dreaming. Everything's okay."

A rasping sound went through the room as a branch scraped the window screen, and Anne sucked in her breath with a harsh whistle.

"It's just the branches," he said, putting his arms around her loosely and stroking her back. Gradually he felt her relax; after a moment she muttered something, turned over, and was still.

Tom tried to get comfortable again, but his nerves were humming with adrenaline. Had he really seen something at the window, or was it the combination of the dream and Anne's own terror?

He closed his eyes and the image of the dead puppy came to him again. Its eyes were closed as if it was only sleeping, but its head was twisted ninety degrees from the body. The pale white cords of the neck muscles looked like electrical cables in some sort of mechanical toy. Or they would have, if there hadn't been blood everywhere.

Something rasped along the screen again, and Tom thought his heart would punch its way through the wall of his chest.

*This is not getting me to sleep*, he thought. *And sleep is what I need right now.*

There was nothing else to do but go outside and cut off the branch. He'd been meaning to do it for weeks now, anyway.

He was next to the wall, and had to slide carefully down the length of the bed to avoid waking Anne. Even so, she got up on one elbow to look at him.

"Where are you going?"

He pulled on his pants and groped around on the dresser top for the flashlight. "Outside," he said. "Just for a second."

"Why?"

"Never mind. Just go back to sleep."

He slid his feet into leather slippers and thought for a second about getting the shotgun out of the closet.

*Jesus*, he thought. *You're really in bad shape.*

He closed the bedroom door behind him and turned on the hall light. The side door would let him out of the house right next to the tree, but he found himself unwilling to go out empty-handed.

He went into the kitchen and took a butcher knife out of the drawer. He told himself he needed it to trim back the branch, but he

realized he wasn't fooling himself. Instead of going back to the side door, he went out the front, turning on the porch light.

The wind had picked up from the north, blowing thin shreds of cloud over the moon. Tom had stopped, puzzled, and then figured out what was bothering him. With the wind out of the north he shouldn't have been able to smell the glades anymore, but for some reason the odor was still there. The air was cooling off, and Tom felt goose-bumps knotting themselves on the skin of his bare arms.

He opened the gate into the chicken yard and heard something thump into the dirt. His hand snapped back reflexively; then he realized that something had fallen off the top of the gate when he moved it.

He bent over for a closer look and for a long moment he didn't believe what he saw. Then his mouth slowly came open and the flash-light dropped from his fingers.

Anne lay in bed and looked at the wedge of light coming in through the door. She hadn't been able to get back to sleep after Tom had left the bed.

She tried to remember what had awakened her. It had been so vivid and close to reality that it was hard to separate from what had followed. She knew she had been seeing some shadowy . . . *thing*, but she'd seen more than just the physical form, she'd also seen its feelings. Through the jumble of emotions she'd felt a hopelessness—and a driving compulsion. It had frightened her, and when she came awake she was still seeing it, there at the window. Even after Tom had held her and talked to her, she could still see it.

The Valium made her feel insubstantial, but it didn't quiet the voices in her head. She wondered where Tom was, what he was doing, why he was taking so long.

The house was quieter now than she could ever remember it. Even Denny upstairs was not shifting around or making noises in his sleep. The soft sound of her own breathing was starting to hypnotize her, and she felt her eyelids slowly close.

Suddenly she was sitting bolt upright in the bed. A noise had gone directly into her subconscious, and now she couldn't even remember what sort of noise it had been. But it was wrong, not a normal noise at all, and this time she knew there would be no more sleep.

"Tom?" she called softly.

Silence, then a rustling, scraping sort of sound from outside.

"Tom!" She didn't care if Denny woke up. Even the sound of his crying would be a relief from the fear and tension that were suffocating her.

She knew she had to get out of bed and look for Tom. *Don't even think about it, she told herself. Just do it, because you don't have any choice about it. Something's wrong, and you have to know what it is.*

She dropped her legs over the side of the bed and felt them hit something soft and furry. Tom's description of the mutilated puppy flashed across her mind, and she bit off a scream an instant before it could get out.

*It's your slippers,* she told herself. She reached out with her feet again and slipped them inside.

*Now get up.*

She walked around to the foot of the bed. Her hand went to the drawstring of the curtains, hesitated, then pulled it sharply down.

Nothing. The tree, with a leafy arm held against the screen. The dusty yard, empty as a desert in the moonlight.

As she turned her head, something glittered in the dirt. She glanced back again and saw a piece of metal lying near the fence. It looked for all the world like one of her kitchen knives, but she couldn't understand how it had gotten outside.

She went back around the bed and reached for the lamp. She didn't even realize how badly her hand was shaking until she felt the slick porcelain skitter out of her grasp and crash onto the floor.

"Shit!" she cried, and it was almost a scream. There was no overhead light in the bedroom; Tom had always meant to put one in, and now it was too late, too late.

She wrapped her hands around the knob of the hall door and forced herself to calm down. Nothing was wrong, nothing beyond the jumpy feeling in her stomach. She would get the flashlight, clean up the mess, and go find Tom.

Tom had taken the flashlight.

All right then, she'd go find Tom. And as a concession to her nerves, she'd take the shotgun with her.

Denny sat by the window upstairs, hardly daring to breathe. He knew he wasn't supposed to be out of bed, and sometimes when he walked around at night the floorboards would creak and Sissy would come up and find him.

Funny things were happening. First had been the funny thing with the puppy, which wasn't funny at all, and he didn't like to think about it because it made his chest hurt and his eyes burn. Then there had been the dream, and when he woke up from it Sissy was screaming downstairs. Then Tom had gone outside and Denny had come to the

window to watch him. He came out the front door, right under the window, carrying a knife and looking very frightened. He had disappeared around one side of the house and after a while Sissy had gotten up, and now lights were coming on all through the house.

The dream had been the funniest part of all. Denny didn't usually remember dreams, except the ones the doctors had helped him with, but this one he did. Feelings of being lost and confused and frightened. And very, very hungry.

Anne could see Tom's tracks in the porch light, leading around toward the south side of the house through the soft dirt. She was looking down and following them, carrying the gun cradled in her arms, and so she saw it before she stepped on it.

It took nearly ten seconds for her to realize it had once been a chicken. The head was folded completely back against the body, and blood had soaked through all its feathers. There was blood on the top of the gate, where it had obviously been lying.

The way the puppy had been lying on the shelf.

She tasted bile, and the strength seemed to leak right out of her legs. She put one arm out and steadied herself against the side of the house.

"Tom!" she shouted. "Tom!"

The wind snapped at her nightgown and a strand of hair stung her face like a tiny whip. There was no other answer.

She pushed open the gate and bent to pick up the piece of glittering metal. It *was* one of her kitchen knives, a butcher knife, and something had discolored the handle and part of the blade. For an awful moment she thought it was blood. . . . Then she saw that it was something else, something like mud, with the greenish color of the river bottoms in it.

Tom's footprints ended in a scuffed place in the sand; it looked like branches had been dragged over it to cover up the tracks. The brush marks led off toward the tree at the bedroom window.

"Tom?" she called again, hopelessly.

Something was wrong, beyond question, and she tried to sort through the drugged, frightened muddle in her head for the sensible thing to do. She wanted help, no matter how foolish she might sound, and she was going to try to get some.

She went back into the brightness of the house and picked up the phone. The buzz of the dial tone was a comfort to her, and she suddenly realized how afraid she'd been that the phone wouldn't be

working.

She dialed the sheriff's number from a little white stick-on label on the cradle of the phone. It seemed to ring forever, but finally a woman's voice answered.

"Sheriff's office."

"This is . . . this is Anne Jeffries, out on the old post road. I think . . . I think I have a prowler."

"You called earlier?"

"That's right. You said . . . unless it was an emergency you couldn't . . . but now I think it is, yes, an emergency . . ."

"All right, Mrs. Jeffries, I'll get someone out there as soon as I can, but it's going to take a while. Is your husband there?"

"Yes. That is—" A sound came from the bedroom, a rustling, then a creaking of bedsprings. "Yes, he is. Listen, I'll call you right back, okay?"

"Mrs. Jeffries? Wait, I need—"

Anne put the phone down and went back to the bedroom. "Tom? Is that you?" The shotgun was still in her hands, and she couldn't bring herself to let go of it, not yet.

She pushed open the bedroom door, but the light from the hall barely reached the corner where the bed was. She stepped inside, barely noticing as a piece of broken lamp crunched under her foot. The outline of a body was just visible on the bed, and a trickle of moonlight from the window glittered on the red of Tom's beard.

"Tom? Why don't you say something?" He was sulking again, she thought, but it didn't matter. She was so relieved to see him that she could put up with his moodiness. She laid the shotgun by the door and crawled into bed, sliding across to get next to his warmth.

"Tommy?" She reached up to stroke his face, running her hand up his neck, and her hand came to a mouth where no mouth should be. Her hand was drenched in cool, sticky blood.

She felt the greyness of fainting close over her, but her horror of the bed was so great that she fought it off and rolled onto the floor, still half-conscious.

She wiped her hands across the sheets, the smell of blood now seeming to fill the entire room. Her stomach rolled and twisted inside her and she could taste acid bile burning the back of her throat. The darkness had a coarse texture to it, like black burlap, and she prayed she wouldn't faint, that she could get to the shotgun and stay awake until someone came to help.

Still too weak to stand, she scooted herself backward on the

hardwood floor, toward the rectangle of light from the hallway and the gleaming barrel of the shotgun.

The stairs in the hallway groaned with the weight of someone walking on them.

*It's still inside, she thought. And, oh God, it's been up there with Denny . . .*

She got to the gun and crawled back into the shadows of the bedroom with it as slow footsteps moved down the stairs; a shuffle, a creak, a pause, and another shuffle.

She sighted through the doorway, the barrel propped on her upraised knees, trying to keep herself from shaking. *Only another few seconds, she thought. Another couple of seconds, then close your eyes and make yourself do it and it will be over.*

The shuffling reached the bottom of the stairs and moved slowly toward her. She took up the slack in the trigger and held her breath.

And nearly shot her brother as he shambled past her into the yard.

The tension went out of her like the light from the broken bulb. Her head went down onto her knees and the tears started out of her eyes. She tried to call Denny's name, but all that came out was a sandpaper noise from deep in her throat.

Then she remembered what was waiting outside for Denny, and the blood hammered in her ears.

"I can't," she heard herself whispering. "I can't go on." But somehow she got to her feet again and went into the hall and out the open door to the yard.

Denny was running now, toward the corral, and in a couple of seconds he would be out of the circle of light from the house and she wouldn't be able to see him.

"Denny!" Her words whipped away on the wind, and Denny faded into the shadows.

The darkness next to the barn was full of darker shapes, and she strained to make them out as she stumbled forward, clutching the shotgun. As she moved through the dark she could see the outline of the tractor and the individual posts of the fence. And then she was seeing shapes where there shouldn't have been any, and she pulled up short. She closed her eyes, then opened them again, but it only made things worse.

It was the scene of a slaughter. Blackie, the mare, was sprawled across the bench seat of the tractor, forelegs bent, throat torn open. A few feet away lay their sow, belly up on a watering trough with her



head flopped over at an impossible angle.

The dirt in all directions around them was soaked with blood.

The sweet, metallic smell of it made Anne's stomach heave, and this time her dinner came up. She fell to her knees, not even trying to fight it, sucking burning gasps of air into her lungs between the spasms.

From far away she heard Denny's voice.

For just an instant she thought he might be talking to the police, that help might have arrived. The idea faded as quickly as it had come, and she knew Denny was talking to the killer.

She was just getting to her feet when she saw Denny backing away from a deeper darkness in the shadows next to the barn.

"D-don't be scared," Denny was saying to it. "Puh-puh-please don't be scared."

The wood fence of the corral stood between her and her brother, and she got over it with clumsy speed. Something unexpected was happening to her, blanking out the memory of her slaughtered husband, turning off the Valium, even pushing the fear into some other part of her brain where it didn't bother her. She pointed the shotgun into the shadows.

"Denny," she said. "Go to the house. Now."

Denny was almost within her reach as he turned around.

"Sissy?"

His puffy, childish face struggle with ideas that were too big for him to put into words.

"What is it, Sissy?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. She tried to keep her voice calm, but it slipped away from her at the end of the sentence. "But it's bad, Denny. It's some kind of awful monster, and it can hurt you."

"Monster?" Denny said. "Like me?"

*Oh God, she thought, not now. Some other time, when I can deal with it.* "Run!" she told him. "Run away. As fast as you can."

She saw Denny pick up the fear in her voice, saw it seize control of him. He spun around, tried to run, and tripped over his own feet. His head went into the wooden fence and his eyes rolled back. He moaned softly.

Anne stepped between Denny and the shadow. "Stop," she said to it, "or I'll shoot."

Then the smell hit her, and once and for all she knew that the killer was no escaped lunatic, was not even human at all. It was a river-bottom smell, chalky and decaying, but with a yeasty sourness

underneath that threatened to gag her all over again.

A matted, green-brown arm came out of the darkness, and Anne pulled the trigger of the gun.

The explosion kicked her back two steps and nearly made her fall over Denny, but she kept on her feet. When she looked up, the creature was still moving, slowly coming into the light.

She couldn't seem to focus her eyes on it. It was seven feet tall, asymmetrical, pulpy, without any obvious features except its arms and legs, leaking its foul odor in a cloud around it.

She pumped another shell into the chamber and fired the gun again. This time she was ready for the impact, and she watched as the thing took the full charge of buckshot the way a bull might take a blow with a stick. And then it was coming again.

Anne knew she was going to die.

She had time enough to pump and fire again, and then it occurred to her, too late, to turn and run. But it seemed easier to stand there and face that awful thing than to face the thought of running away and leaving Denny alone. She was pulling back on the handgrip to load another shell when the thing took hold of her.

And pushed her gently aside.

Off balance, she slipped to her knees and watched it step over Denny's legs and through the gap in the fence, heading for the tiny pasture where the cows were left to graze.

And then it came to her. One dog. One chicken. One horse, one pig. One human.

And as she heard the cow's scream of terror and the slick, chopping sound of its death, she remembered her dream, and knew that the thing was only sampling, only trying to find something that didn't turn to gall in its mouth. That it was looking for a prey that no longer existed. That it was lost, fallen somehow into a time and place where it didn't belong at all.

*Like me?* Denny had said.

With a strength that Anne could not comprehend, the creature lifted the dead cow in its arms and turned with it as if looking for some place to put it, driven by the same unfathomable purpose that had made it put her dead husband back in her bed. Finally it laid the mangled corpse in front of her, almost apologetically, and moved away.

A shivering took hold of her and she hugged her knees to herself, listening as the thing shuffled off into the darkness, still searching.

# Tiger of the Mind

## by Ron Wolfe

*You can't see it, but it can see you . . .  
and it's hungry.*

A gas station fire, to a news chaser like me on a slow night, is the next best thing to having Mount St. Helens flare up in the middle of downtown. And this one sounded like a charm.

The fastest way to get there was straight through that part of town where even the streetwalkers don't go out after dark and the cops don't go at all if they can help it. I ran the red light and turned left onto what the *Herald* city desk fondly calls Hell Street.

Where my car died.

I sat there in the intersection like a wad of gum stuck on the ballroom floor while the traffic whirled and screeched around me and the radio monitor taunted me with the voice of a fire captain calling for help: *"It's gonna blow . . . the pump's gonna blow . . . oh, geez, lookit that!"*

All I could do was take notes off the monitor, magically transforming the makings of a page-one story into a sorry three paragraphs to be cast adrift somewhere between Ann Landers and the want ads.

I abandoned the car, looking for a phone where even a dead car in the middle of the street would have a way of disappearing before I got back to it. The best hope was a bar on the corner with a wino passed out beside the entrance, the Shorty's Pub version of a doorman.

The peeling red door was propped open with an empty wooden Coke case to catch the night breeze, which was laden with street dust. I stepped inside—that was when I saw him.

And one smoldering gas station, more or less, didn't matter anymore.

"Thom!" I called to him, and his face tilted up slowly. I strained to be sure I had recognized him after all. I felt the way a kid would, upturning an old and familiar rock in grandma's garden, and the under-

side of it is all worms and black beetles, but it's still the same rock.

He waved at me with a grudging tip of his hand from a shadowed table in the corner of the room. "How's it goin', Hank?" he said.

I wanted to run in two directions at the same time. One way, to call the city desk and tell them that I'd found Thom McClure—State Lieutenant Governor McClure, whose wife, on yesterday's front page, had pronounced him "probably dead, wherever he is."

And the other way, just to get to him. We weren't close friends, but he was always straight with me, and that made him special.

I picked up the half-empty glass of beer from the table in front of him; it was lukewarm to the touch. "Give me a gimlet or give me death," you used to say. Your tastes have changed," I told him.

His mouth twitched once in a failed attempt at the grin I used to call "boyish." He was wearing remnants of the same grey pin-striped suit he'd worn the last time I saw him three months ago, only now it sagged on him. And the white hair wasn't just a trace at the temples anymore.

"You must know a lot of people are looking for you," I said.

"I don't keep up with the news much." His eyes darted as if to focus on someone standing directly behind me; I turned, but there was no one close or paying any attention to us.

"Look, Hank, I've got some . . . business to settle, that's all," he said.

"Some business. Let me fill you in on the headlines. The cops say you were kidnapped, and the governor himself has been offering to pay the ransom demand. Except there hasn't been any."

He kicked a chair out toward me. "So I'm the big catch of the day, so far as you're concerned. I should've know there was no hole dark enough where I could hide from you. Sit down, Windell."

The bartender sauntered over, and I ordered two cold ones. "Bottle, not tap." Thom's glass looked like it had been washed in a vat of old floor wax.

"I've got lots of time to talk," he said. "Talking helps keep me awake, and having you here beats yammering to myself."

Almost by reflex, I reached for my notebook, and this time the smile came through for him.

"Good luck," he said. "Print any of this and they'll think we're both crazy. I figure telling you the whole story is the best way to make you go away and forget you saw me."

I already wished I could. The Aspen tan was gone from his face, replaced by a color like sour milk. His eyes had a raw, red cast.

He took a swallow of beer. "Well, here it is," he said. "I know, I told you before that I was having trouble getting to sleep. But I never told you why."

I remembered. It had been after an interview. He'd asked me to straighten up his quotes, because he was half asleep and not making much sense. I'd thought he'd simply tied one on the night before.

"Nightmares," he said. "The way it started, I would dream every night that I was being followed. I'd turn and almost catch a glimpse of the thing behind me, but never quite. And I'd wake up screaming."

"You must have been a joy to your wife."

He fumbled for the last cigarette in the package. I lit it for him to save time.

"You should go into marriage counseling, Windell. Except for being divorced, you're a natural." He sucked the smoke down to his toes. "The fact is, my wife did get sick of it." His head jerked sharply to the left of me; the eyes narrowed at nothing.

He sat frozen in that expression. To bring him around, I asked, "So then what happened?"

"She kept after me to get help. I had a physical, and there was nothing wrong with me. I told her I couldn't go in for therapy or anything like that; certified nuts don't get themselves elected. But the same dream went on and went on, and I finally gave up."

"This 'something' kept following you?"

He dropped the cigarette stub into the beer glass. It hissed at being killed.

"The shrink said it meant I had some subconscious fear, some big worry always tagging after me. And to make it go away, I would have to face up to it. He said—"

Thom's eyes trained on the front door of the bar.

"He said the next time I dreamed, I should turn and hold my ground. I should call out, 'Who are you? What do you want?' and make the thing come out and identify itself so I could see it for what it really was . . ."

"So that's what you did?"

He pressed his fingertips against the hollows of his cheeks. His hands were shaking. "Yes." The shake spread to the sound of his voice, almost a quivering whisper. "The first couple of times, nothing happened. I just woke up. It was the third time I called that it . . . came out."

He said something else, too softly for me to hear.

"What was it?"

He was staring at the doorway again, not drunk or doped up. His eyes moved like the lights in a pinball game. I turned. Again, nothing.

I waved my hand in front of his face. "What are you looking for?"

But he ignored that one. "You asked me what it was," he said. "Let me give you a big tip, Windell. Go ask the cops how many killings there've been right around this area in the last month. I'd say ten or twelve at least, but some of those they might not know about. Ask them how badly the bodies were torn apart. And then ask them what they think could have done it."

I go through a stack of police reports every day: bar shootings, break-ins, rape accounts, something for everybody. It's all relatively good clean fun. Anything really splashy, you have to find out some other way and then come back and pry it out of them.

"I remember just one," I told him. "A wino, no name. They said he died of a pickled gizzard in the alley, and the dogs got him."

"Check again. The dogs never had it so good."

I jerked at the touch of a hand on my shoulder. The bartender was standing behind me. I glanced up past his apron splotted with colors Picasso never heard of.

"That your Ford in the street outside?" he asked. I nodded. "It's nothin' to me, but I'd go take care of it if I was you."

I stood and saw my car framed through the neon Schlitz sign in the front window, surrounded by a pack of three teenaged street hoods. One guy was working at the door lock with a piece of wire.

I looked at Thom. "Suppose I was dumb enough to go out there, would you still be here if and when I got back?"

"Truth to tell, Hank, I don't know," he said.

"Thanks," I sat down again. I ordered two more beers and told the barkeep to let me know if they needed any help hoisting the motor out. "Okay," I said to Thom, "you dared this nightmare thing to show itself, and it did. Then what?"

What I really wanted to ask was what the state's lieutenant governor was doing hiding out in a part of town where a dead wino is the local version of a dog's best friend. But at least he was talking; I didn't want to throw him off.

"Then?" he said. His line of sight shifted over the top of my head. "Why don't you ask it? It's right behind you."

There was no glint of humor in his eyes. I turned quickly. Behind me was nothing but a grey haze of cigarette smoke.



"Oh, you can't see it," he said. "But I can. I do. All the time. And I have to watch it, because it wants to get away from me, but it can't so long as I'm watching. I didn't make up the rules. I just learned."

He took a long drink, his eyes never closing. "It's standing upright now. It was like that the first time I saw it. I think it just wants to show you how it stretches out to three or four feet taller than you are. It could drop and be on you like a spider, except I'm watching it."

I lifted my bottle in a toast to the air behind me. "Here's lookin' at you, kid."

"Not funny, Hank," he said. I already knew it wasn't.

"I called it out," he said. "That was the mistake. Like a vampire, you know—it can't come in and get you unless you invite it. I did the same as saying, 'Hi, there, come on in and let's talk about how I can get rid of you.' And it left my dreams after that, all right."

He was rolling the bottle back and forth between his hands, his wedding band clacking and chattering against the glass. "I woke up freezing cold. I thought my heart was going to pound a hole right through my chest, and I was screaming again. Suzanne grabbed me and tried to hold me down. I couldn't stop. She switched on the nightstand light, and there—"

He stopped, took a deep breath to calm himself. "There it was at the side of the bed, standing over her. The tongue of the thing uncoiled and dripped across the back of her neck. She didn't even notice. I passed out. And the next day, I found our German shepherd dead—torn apart—in the backyard."

His head dipped suddenly like a fishing bobber taken by a small perch. "I shouldn't have had those two beers, Hank. Can't stay awake . . . haven't slept in forty-eight hours, maybe more."

His eyes aimed half-lidded toward the door again, and he pointed. His voice rose. Two men at the bar turned and stared back at him.

"See it?" he said. "See? It thinks it can sneak out. But I see you, you son of a bitch! I'm still awake."

He sat up stiffly. "It got the dog, and it got the kid next door. You remember that, Hank? Nobody ever knew what happened to him—just disappeared from his bed one night. But I knew. I as good as killed him myself, because I fell asleep."

I glanced around us.

"It's over by the jukebox," Thom said. "Flexing its . . . paws like a cat. The claws come out when the fingers bend. Now it's coming this way again."



He slapped himself sharply twice. "Now do you see what I'm doing here? I'm giving it fresh meat nobody will miss—bums, winos, transients. I've got to sleep sometime. I don't know what else to do."

He slumped against the table. "Oh, damn . . . I can't . . . hold on anymore. Get out of here, Hank."

I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Thom!"

I told myself, *Wait a minute. The guy is dead tired. Let him sleep.*

And then I shook him again harder.

"Thom!"

And heard a scraping noise behind me. I spun sideways in my chair like a carnival ride. Beer bottles clattered off the table around me, but Thom didn't stir.

But I scared the barkeep, and he stumbled backward a step. "Pick up this mess before you go," he said, angry now. He gestured toward Thom with a snap of the red rag in his hand. "And get him outta here. This ain't no flophouse."

I nodded and nodded again; even my neck had the shakes. "Can I use the phone?"

"Sure. For fifteen cents, same as I always charge the President." He snapped the rag toward a pay phone on the wall across the room.

I dialed the first three numbers of the governor's security office.

I tried not to wonder what knocked aside the Coke case holding the door open.

A darker shape flowed into the night-black rectangle of the closing door.

I dialed the rest of the number, and only then realized that I'd never heard a dial tone. The phone against my ear was cold and quiet as a rock.

I dropped the receiver. It thumped against the wall, tapping, tapping.

The jukebox drummed out a last chorus of "Stand by Your Man" and killed itself.

The drunks at the bar turned frozen, staring at the window like a line of machine men programmed and switched off in unison.

And the front window shattered. The neon Schlitz sign sputtered and snapped.

"Damn you punks!" The roaring protest of the barkeep boomed and echoed. He barreled around the edge of the counter and toward the window, his right arm extended like a bayonet, his hand dwarfing the snub-nosed shape of a revolver.

"You out there!"—and he leaned out.

My feet perversely sprinted me across the room in exactly the direction I didn't want to go. I reached to catch the collar of his shirt and pull him back.

His feet flew up in front of my face. The heel of one shoe cracked me in the jaw and staggered me as he was lifted and dragged through the broken glass into the darkness outside.

There was one shot, one muffled, throaty sound, and a frenzy of tearing and breaking.

I ran outside—me, the hero too scared to stand up for his own car. But hell, this was a *story*.

The barkeep—most of him—was on the sidewalk just beyond the window. I recognized him by the red rag still clenched in his left hand.

I don't like to think what became of his right.

I turned and caught a glimpse, almost, not quite, of something watching me just out of sight down the street.

Questions are my business, and Thom never told me the answers he'd gotten. I called out, "Who are you? What do you want?"

And the next day, I broke two big stories—two page-one headlines.

One was a string of killings in the wino district. Thom was right; the total came to a dozen known, not counting the barkeep.

The cops put out poison for the dogs.

Positioned higher, with a banner head, was the story telling how Thom died. The doctors said that what finally got him was heart failure. They tried to give him a sedative, but he refused it and stayed awake until the end.

And one story more: about the nurse found slaughtered in the hospital parking lot.

I'm tired now. I want to go to sleep.

But I had this dream last night about being followed, and I already know the answer.

It wants me.

# Frontiers

## by Kit Reed

*It was just like the Old West: The prairie,  
the settlers, and the homestead.  
The only things missing were the savages.*

Every time he left home, Gunnar Morgan had the same misgivings. As he kissed Anne and the twins goodbye he was visited by all the farewell scenes in all those old Westerns: the settler kissing the wife and young ones and going off to town only to come back and find the homestead flattened, with an Indian spear planted in the wreckage and some child's rag doll abandoned next to a naked, charred ribcage still smoking in the ruins. The settler would weep over the remains in the full knowledge that in such circumstances the dead were always better off than the ones that were captured. In the movies the settler always seemed surprised, while Gunnar and the rest of the audience knew ahead of time, from the moment at which they parted. Now that he had a family of his own, Gunnar thought perhaps the settler had known too, but in the frontier society there were times when a man had to go ahead and do that which needed doing.

Still, he held Anne too tight at the last moment; she must have guessed at some of it because she ran her hands behind her back and took his hands firmly, helping him to release her. "Gunnar, don't worry."

"Alone out here. One woman alone, with nobody but a couple of children."

"The sooner you go, the sooner you'll be back."

Why did that sound so familiar? Troubled by echoes, he said, "It's so wild out here, I just hate to leave you."

"I don't care. I like it."

He looked at the glint in her eyes and thought perhaps she did.

"Take care of yourself."

She lifted her head. "I always do." She seemed compelled to add: "The girls like it too."

"Oh Anne, please be careful."

"Don't worry, there's nothing out here."

"Still . . ." What was he afraid of, really?

"Gunnar, go!" She was about to lose her temper. It was hard, he supposed, all of them shut in here with no place to go and no place to be alone. These days he and Anne grappled over the smallest issues, sawing back and forth over each petty decision. At the end she always smiled and deferred to him, saying, "After all, you're the boss here." In another circumstance she would be boss and they both knew it. He blamed himself for these clashes; it was his fault that they were stuck out here. He put her lapses down to cabin fever.

The twins were hanging on his waist. "Bring us a present from Flagstaff, Daddy."

Reluctant to let go of Anne's fingers, he looked down at them: Jenna, who moved like a willow whip, and practical little Betsy. "What do you want me to bring you?"

Betsy said, "A book I haven't read."

Jenna's face blossomed. "Anything, just as long as it's pretty."

"I never should have brought you to this godforsaken place," he said over their heads. "You should have friends, you should be going to exciting places."

Anne lifted her head with an odd smile. "This will have to do for the time being." She was helping him to leave. "I need you to go now, we're running out of everything. And if you can find that fabric I've been waiting for, it will make all the difference."

"Oh, Anne." His voice failed him.

"Hurry. When you get back, we'll have a party."

"I love you, Anne."

"I know it."

She'll be all right, he told himself, riding out. This is a different story altogether. He waited outside the dome until she had secured the airlock. Now nothing could get in or out, and as far as he knew, nothing moved in the vast, dead lands outside it. Anne had sidearms and emergency beepers in addition to the laser cannon, but his heart contracted every time he had to go away and he would walk with his jaw taut and his shoulders high until he came riding back over the last ridge and saw her standing next to the airlock, waving to him through the dome's tough, transparent surface.

He had to go to Flagstaff to pick up supplies and a new chip for his communicator because the thing kept missing digits, which meant he also had to deliver the month's observations to the government office in person. Before the cataclysm everything was easier; computer systems were reliable and they could be checked and augmented by voice transmission. After the failure of Fail-Safe, and the cataclysm, a great many things simply stopped working. Even now, with civilization more or less reassembled, they were still not working. Gunnar felt badly about this but, he thought, he owed his job to the disaster. How would he keep Anne and the twins without it? They lived in comfort in the dome, maintaining one of the outposts Gunnar had established. It was Gunnar's job to collect data because somebody in Washington reasoned that if the air ever cleared, it would happen first in the remote areas. How long would it take? Would it ever happen? Gunnar did not know; he only knew that he had to go on as if this would happen because, when there is no choice, hoping is always better than not hoping.

Flagstaff depressed him. It was crowded and ugly under the enormous dome, with too many people clogging the passages, all looking gaunt and frantic.

It always took him a week to finish his business, not because he had that much to do, but because of the lines at the government offices. He shaved the time a little by sleeping in the waiting room instead of paying someone to hold his place at night, but he tossed restlessly, and when he did sleep he dreamed of painted savages swarming over the ramparts in enormous numbers. At the supply depot he could not find half the things Anne had asked for. There were flawed fabrics, meat tinned in spite of the maggots, weevilly flour. He did the best he could, knowing that, whatever he brought, Anne would pretend to be delighted. Then she would take it and transform it as she had the outpost, making pretty little curtains and tablecloths, constructing beautiful dinners out of the meanest ingredients.

O h, Anne. He had robbed her of her job and her society; they both pretended she could sell her designs from the outpost and if she could not — well, he was going to figure out some way for her to get them to the fashion center. Until he did, it was important for him to encourage her to keep working and for both of them to pretend this was somehow possible. He bought her a piece of artificial turquoise and picked up some candy for the twins and, as an afterthought, a bit of colored glass for Jenna. Then he headed out across the darkening badlands, already imagining what Anne would have prepared for the homecoming dinner, what

he would say when the twins swamped him with the drawings they had made to surprise him. In the ruined world he fixed on the life at home, which he had wrought with his bare hands and which would be going on as always, waiting for him to walk back into it. Once he had shut himself in and sealed the airlock, he could believe the world was at rights because, inside the dome, he and Anne tried to make the life they wanted.

Leaving Flagstaff, he thought the color of the sky had altered in the week he had been there. He was certain the air was denser. Sunset bloodied the desert and as the broken shells of buildings outside the dome gave way to broken rock shapes and ruined mesas, shadows fell like knife blades across the path Gunnar traveled. Once he thought he saw something moving and he kicked the air cushion on the scooter a little higher and checked the shield. He told himself this was routine; after all, these were contaminated lands and he needed to protect himself, but he was running the scooter too fast and he understood that there was more. He had the idea that something had changed; there were strange forces stirring. What was the matter? Just nerves, he told himself: too many days away from the family, but that did not explain it. He could not say exactly what he feared, only that he feared it. He would not feel easy until he had ridden up over the last rise and could see Anne under the lights inside the airlock, waving. It was near dawn by the time he made the approach, and as the sky began to pale he started in alarm and jerked around to look at the long ridge off to his right. In the flash before he turned and saw nothing, he had imagined he saw this: a frieze of people naked as the figures on a Greek urn, streaming over the crest and away from him.

Coming downhill, he was relieved to see the dome exactly as he had left it. There were Anne's plants in hanging baskets, just inside the airlock; the emission tube was steaming, which meant that she was preparing his homecoming dinner in spite of the hour. He strained to see her and when he did not, he thought she must be in the house, releasing the catch for the decontamination hangar. He gunned the scooter inside, started the process, and waited until the gauges told him it was safe.

Everything was as he had left it. Anne's little garden was flourishing under the artificial light; she had picked tomatoes for the homecoming meal and left them in the grass. He was surprised to see the knife stuck into the earth next to them; usually she was not so careless. He picked up the basket and went to the house, calling, "Anne, I'm home."

When she did not answer, he thought she must be in the bathroom;

the rotten supplies made them sick more often than they would have admitted.

"Anne," he said a little louder. "Are you all right?"

He imagined he heard her answer.

"I brought in the tomatoes."

The sound turned out to be the kettle whistling in the neat little kitchen. The sauce was just beginning to burn off the cutlets she had been making. He turned off the stove and went down the hall.

"Anne, are you in there?"

The bathroom turned out to be empty.

"All right, if you're hiding, I give up."

Nobody answered and nobody came.

"Game's over, okay?"

He went into the twins' room. Jenna's bed had not been slept in. She was like a little spook sometimes, flitting around the dome in the middle of the night; they would find her asleep in the garden the next morning. Betsy had been in her bed not five minutes ago; there was the dent her head left in the pillow. He put his face in it, smelling the young girl smell of soap and musk and candy. It was still warm.

"Come on, dammit, everybody."

He was tired. It did not seem like a good game; they weren't in the house and he searched the garden in growing exasperation. They would have to lie flat in the synthetic earth to elude him and yet he could not see anybody. He searched the house from the gable to the crawlspace underneath. In a panic, he made certain Anne's clothes were where she had left them. If she ran away, where would she go anyway, and how would she get out? There was not another scooter between here and Flagstaff. Mourning, he went into the kitchen. In addition to the cutlets, Anne had been making a dessert and a bowl of cream substitute; the cream mixture was still frothing. She must have run out in a hurry. Run out. She couldn't. Their suits were still hanging by the airlock and they were good only for short distances. He would have found their bodies within a few feet of the dome.

"Oh, Anne! Is it something I did?"

His voice tore through the silence in the dome, but all he heard was the reverberation, circling and coming back to mock him.

He had not really expected an answer.

Frantic, he inserted the new chip and punched an emergency message into the console. FAMILY MISSING. UNEXPLAINED. All he got back was the usual: MESSAGE BEING PROCESSED. It would be days before they got back to him. He got in the scooter and began sweeping the surround-

ing wastelands in widening circles, not because he thought he would find them alive, even if he did find them, but because a portion of his life had been stolen and he would not feel right until he could restore it. Circling hopelessly, he called them by name, not because he imagined they would hear him through the shield or across the terrifying distances, but because he could imagine they were still his at least for as long as he kept calling them. By the time he gave up altogether, which was not for several weeks, he had covered hundreds of miles, ranging wide in spite of his fears, the sinister shadows, and crevices in the empty, blasted lands.

Finally the terminal acknowledged his first transmission:

ABSENCE UNEXPLAINED.

He sent back: PLEASE EXPLAIN IT.

DON'T WORRY.

EXPLAIN. He tapped out this last in growing impatience. The exchange had taken several weeks and when he returned from his last foray the terminal was displaying what would turn out to be the last message on the subject.

THIS KIND OF THING HAPPENS ALL THE TIME.

"Like hell it does!"

It was almost more than he could bear, he thought, and he tapped in his last response: BUT THEY LOVED ME.

Preparing for yet another sweep, he stopped suddenly in the middle of filling his pack with provisions. He was riveted by Anne's cutlets, petrifying in their sauce. The mold growing on the abandoned cream substitute filled him with sadness, and then anger. *Damned if I'll eat her food*, he thought, *not until I've had an explanation.*

Whose fault was this, anyway — his, for leaving them alone, or hers, for being careless? What were the last things they'd said to each other? He scoured his memory, trying to remember her exact tone the last time he saw her. What was it? Love, or exasperation? If the latter, whose fault was it — his, for bringing her out here to this awful place, or hers, for losing faith? Should he have loved her better or was it her fault, for not loving him, or was it out of their hands altogether?

It came to him in a flash. *This is not my fault. It is beyond my power.*

He would settle in here, and try to reconcile himself. In the next second, of course, his mouth went dry and his heart thudded to a stop: *My God, what if somebody out there stole her?*

KIDNAPPERS? He tapped it into the console.

IMPOSSIBLE. It took a week for this response to come; a week in which he reluctantly disposed of the last meal Anne had cooked for him,



and began setting the house to rights. The letters formed: ENVIRONS UNINHABITABLE.

UNINHABITABLE REALLY?

The machine corrected itself. UNINHABITED.

"Then this is all her fault. Hers," he said aloud, although at the moment he could not have said whether or how this followed.

Now that he had the house shipshape, he gave up looking for them, on the premise that the next move was not his, but hers. Once he had begun keeping up the place and performing his duties in a regular way, he found himself immeasurably comforted by routine and gave himself to the solace of ritual. He did not know what he was going to do without his wife and children, but at the same time he found he had plenty to do: there were the observations to record and transmit; he had to keep the place tidy; he needed to plan and make and clean up after meals; he had to exercise. He occupied almost all of their king-size bed now, sleeping spread-eagled, and he told himself again and again that this was wonderful — the peace and quiet.

Then why did he find himself standing under the dome in the middle of the night, waking from a sound sleep to find himself drenched with sweat and screaming at the red-rimmed moon: "You bitch, how could you do this to me?"

When it was time to make another run to Flagstaff, he secured the dome as best he could and got in the scooter with a premonitory chill, as if at strange footsteps approaching. He shook it off and kicked the scooter into high, running quickly into the city. When he got back this time, with his scooter laden with supplies, he thought at first that nothing had been disturbed. Everything in the dome seemed right but not quite right; it took him several hours to locate the difference. All the presents he had brought in after the last trip, and abandoned in a corner of the twins' room, were missing.

He woke before dawn with a roaring in his ears and his insides trembling. He ran out and battered like a moth against the inside of the dome, plastering himself against the transparent surface. In the next fevered seconds he either did or did not see a wild procession peeling off from a circle in the desert; he could not be certain, because they were already at the top of the ridge, pouring over the horizon; even if he did see this, he could not know whether it was illusion or whether that was really Anne with hair flying and naked breasts gleaming in the poisoned air, running along with them. He threw himself onto the scooter and hurtled out, cursing the seconds it took to move through the ejection

stages. Delayed as he was, he knew if there was anything out there he would catch up with it in a matter of seconds. By the time he came over the ridge, there was no moving and no trace of anything.

"Oh, Annel!" he shouted to the deadlands.

Then he thought: *It's your fault I'm going crazy.*

What would he do if he did come upon her, cowering in the rubble? He did not know.

He searched for a long time.

That night he slept without dreams, and when he woke he was weeping.

After that, he got hold of himself. He added several new elements to his routine — the late-morning coffee, the afternoon drink. He liked being alone, he thought. He had always liked it.

If this was true, then what was the matter with him? He found himself pressed against the dome at odd hours, staring into the night without being sure how he got there. Once he thought he saw somebody staring in — a naked man, the color of the red sand; he thought he saw other naked people standing in the shadows behind him. Another time he imagined he saw Anne and the twins, and another time, the naked man with Anne at his shoulder.

In the morning everything always looked more or less the same, and by the time Gunnar had finished his morning rounds, the fevered visions would have faded.

Still, one night when a sudden wind swept away most of the haze, he saw them again and this time he was certain the savage, if that was what it was, had something bright on a thong at its throat, and touched it just before it laughed and vanished: the turquoise he had brought Anne from Flagstaff.

*Damn you, Anne! Damn you anyway.*

He knew he could not have seen this because nothing could live out there. Still he hardened his heart against her.

Then when he least expected it, he was waked by her calling.

*Gunnar, Gunnar, please.*

He sat up in bed, certain he had been dreaming. He sat in the dark with his eyes wide and his jaws open as if that would help him hear better.

The dome reverberated with her pounding. *Please, Gunnar.*

"Go to hell," he said aloud, and then covered his head with pillows. She had put him through too much; she was gone forever; he could live with that. Still he could hear the drumming. He reached for the sleeping capsule he always kept next to the bed and crunched it between his teeth.

When he woke it was still night; the sky outside was touched with

beginning light and Anne, if it was Anne, was still out there.

He ran outside. It was her, or somebody who looked just like her, splendidly naked, pressing herself against the dome and calling.

"Go away."

Did she answer? *Oh Gunnar, please let me in.*

"I can't, you're dead."

*Not dead. Changed.*

"Oh Anne, why did you leave me?"

*I didn't leave you, I was taken.*

The thought shook him with rage. "You don't love me."

She threw her hands in the air. *I couldn't help it.*

"Now I suppose you want to come back."

*Oh Gunnar, please. I want to come home. We all do.* The twins came out of the murk and stood next to her, taller, beginning to be women.

"Where were you? Where were you all this time?"

*Oh Gunnar, it doesn't matter.*

He was torn; caution and resentment pulled him one way, desire the other. "If you loved me, you never would have gone."

*We couldn't help it. Really. Please let us in.*

He said, "I can't," but his hands were already pressed against hers, separated only by the dome's glassy surface. He was thinking about the apparitions in the night: the savage with the flash of turquoise at the throat; he was thinking about what she and the savage would have done and he was both enraged and maddened. "This is impossible. Everything outside is poison."

*That's what you think.*

"The air is poison."

*That's only what you think.* She danced back a few steps and shook herself.

"You must be poison."

She threw back her head and lifted her arms. *Do I look poison?*

He cried out, putting all the loss and frustration of the last months into his voice: "What were you *doing* all this time?"

*Don't make me stand out here begging.* Then she added that which he needed to hear to make what came next possible. *I love you.*

He thought he knew what he was letting into the dome: doubt and anger, along with whatever contamination their bodies would have collected, but Gunnar found himself moving toward the airlock in spite of himself, passing trembling hands over the dials and switches that would open it to her, and as he did so he could feel his throat close and his body

quicken with a sweet, wild desire.

He hesitated.

This might be a trick.

She might be trying to destroy him.

He realized it didn't really matter.

She was back, enhanced by her absence and whatever had happened to her in it and he knew he would have her.

"I love you too," he said and threw the last switch. The last seal opened and she came in to him, and even as he held out his arms and Anne walked into them without apology or explanation, he could see the twins tumbling in behind her, could see the crazed look in Betsy's eyes, which were all whites, the fact that Jenna's teeth were bared; in the second before he buried his face in Anne's neck he saw lodged in Jenna's dense hair the jawbone of some long-dead small animal, two brightly colored feathers.

# Night Cry

by Katherine M. Turney

*That yowling cat was keeping her awake.  
But what if it wasn't a cat?*

Miss Trudeau opened her eyes. "Oh, pooh," she said softly, exasperated. And it had been such a nice, lovely dream, too, one of those that came back so pleasantly when she would awake in the morning.

It had been vivid, in panoramic color, more hued than real life. She had been running, jumping, rolling in an undulating plain of wildflowers, delicately clouded sky above, soil soft as down beneath her bare feet. Her face had been once more full of the bloom of youth, turned toward the warm, friendly sun, her ears ringing delightedly with the call of birds, the hum of insects.

And it had been popped, exactly like a balloon, by that noise.

The sound had been quite clear, so much so as to practically demand attention. A short, high, sort of clipped sound, something like the yowl of a cat that didn't have its voice up to snuff. Very annoying. That's what it was; she was almost certain of it. A cat. Most likely the Harrises' tom, Stripes.

She tossed the sheet away from her slight, fragile frame. She was fully awake now, and only a cup of hot tea with lemon would make her drowsy. If nothing else, at least after seventy-six years on this earth she'd learned how to put herself to sleep.

Miss Trudeau hefted the window open and leaned cautiously out of her third-floor window, hands on the sill. The night was cool, still, a little sliver of moon peeking out from the cloud cover whenever it could. Only a very few lit windows indicated any life inside the tall, dark apartment buildings surrounding her own. It may not have been the best neighborhood, but it was quiet and secure most of the time, and quiet was one thing Miss Trudeau valued.

She stepped back from the window and felt the cool evening draft chill her. She'd leave it for a short while: fresh air also helped get her to sleep. She pulled her woolen nightgown close about her, and went off to fix her tea.

Miss Trudeau opened her eyes.

Now this was ridiculous. The cat had waited until just after she'd finally dropped off to sleep before yowling again. It was exactly the same sort of sound, as well — short, high, suddenly cutting itself off like the twist of a knob to a water hose. Just enough to bring her back full awake.

"Honestly," she said, becoming angry, her teeth grinding slightly against her lower lip. She'd certainly be giving a piece of her mind to the Harrises. A cat that noisy shouldn't be allowed out when decent people are trying to get some sleep. She had things to do tomorrow, or, rather, today.

But, then again, it might not be Stripes at all; it could be another cat.

What if it wasn't a cat?

She lay back on her bed in the slowly sliding moonlight and gathered her sheets in her hands, clasping them to her breast. Now that she thought back on it, she realized that the noise she'd heard wasn't really that much like the sound of a cat.

It sounded more human.

No, that was silly. Besides, why would someone make a strange sound like that, and why so long between? It was almost as if it were planned.

Planned? No, of course not. Perhaps a child. Yes, that could be the sound: a child, probably hungry, crying out in the night for its mother, as children will. She'll wake up, as Miss Trudeau did, and give it a warm formula. There were a few young couples in the complex, and some of them did have small children. She had never had children herself, but —

The cry sounded again.

Without thinking, she pulled the sheets closer. That didn't even sound like a child, that time. Hardly even human.

The police. She'd have to go to the police and tell them what she'd heard. They would take care of it, wouldn't they?

But what if they just thought she was a dotty old woman who heard strange sounds all the time? How could she prove what she'd heard? In this echo chamber of an apartment complex she couldn't even



be sure where the sounds came from in the first place, much less what they were. She saw herself in the precinct station, telling her story again and again to an indifferent sergeant, filling out reports, looking through books of mug shots, everything she'd ever seen on television. And she knew where it would finally end: face to face with someone she probably didn't even know, staring at each other, memorizing every small detail of a face, the turn of a hand, the cut of a blouse; threatening, terribly cold eyes looking deep into hers and promising —

She could not get involved. She knew she wouldn't be able to take the stress. Daybreak was only two or three short hours away, and then someone would do something about the sound. Someone younger, someone stronger. She had to try to go back to sleep. Yes. That was it. Just go back to sleep. Everything would be all right in the morning, when the new sun would wash the earth clean of the night's imaginings.

She concentrated on sleep, closing her eyes and lying back in the soft, comforting bed, pushing the short, high cry of a lovesick cat from her thoughts.

Miss Trudeau opened her eyes.

This time there had been no sound to wake her.

Heavy silence settled like a muffler as the moon found a moment to slip out from behind the clouds and flood pale gray over her room through the open window.

A glint of tempered steel hung above her.

She only had time for a single high, horrified cry before the axe came down.



*Maybe it was hell, this land  
where madness crept into the bones.  
Or maybe it was just . . .*

# Windigo Country

by Dennis Delaney

Outside, the summer night was cool and breezy, but inside the apartment it was still hot. Danny was going over the books, scribbling figures on a pad, now and then stopping to draw on his cigarette. Kate read, a modern romance, which she had begun to lose interest in. She closed the book and turned to the window. "Listen to the city."

"Hmm."

She looked at Danny, how he hunched over the desk, his mouth moving as he figured. "Leave it alone," she said, thinking how bent with worry he became. Sometimes she hardly recognized him, he'd so changed:

"Just a minute. What's six times seven?"

"Forty-two."

He should have stuck with the cabinet shop, she thought. It wasn't high pressure, and he had smiled then. But that was before he decided he could do better, maybe land a decent-paying job or go back to college. But they hadn't saved a penny toward school. Now he was miserable, and that turned her stomach.

A door closed somewhere above them, and she glanced at the wall clock. It was ten-thirty. Somebody was always either coming or going. Around two there would be a wave of footsteps. That's when the bars closed.

She stood up, walked over to the window, and looked down on the city street. The hotel ran perpendicular to the main drag, which fifty years before had been the center of town commerce, since

changed into a howling string of dank taverns, dark cafés, and grim redbrick hotels, one of which they had chosen to manage. She'd hated it from day one. The people were desperate, confused—pale and spiritless in winter, burnt and thirsty in summer, shifting with atrophied minds from hotel to hotel. They frightened her. She wanted out before she drowned in this place. But Danny, he wouldn't leave; he'd found a home here and was determined to keep this job.

The bell chimed. Somebody was at the desk.

"Hey," said Danny. "You want to get that, hon?"

It was dark outside, but there were pools of light on the pavement from the street lamps. A shadowy pair stood under one, sharing a bottle in a bag. That's the kind of place it was, she thought, people struggling to get high.

The bell again.

"Hey?" said Danny.

"Okay, I'm goin'." She turned on her heels. What's more, she thought, someday she was going to have to choose between running and dying. She opened the door to the lobby and stepped out behind the front desk. On the other side stood an old man wearing a white shirt and tie, a black jacket draped over his arm, and a black hat pushed back on his head. He was tall, rather handsome, but weary. She hadn't seen this one before.

"What can I do for you, mister?"

He rested his hands on the counter. "I need a room for a few days."

"Sure," she said. "Singles run ten bucks a night, doubles—"

"Single will do."

"Okay, I think we can fix you up." She looked at the key-board tacked on the wall. "We got a room over the street. Or if you like choo-choos, we got a room with a splendid view of the railroad yard."

Smiling, he removed his hat. His hair was white and sparse, and his scalp was sunburned. "The street side will be fine."

"Okay." She opened the receipt book. "How long you want it?"

"Five days."

"Okay. Fifty bucks, sixty if you want a—whatchacallit—hot plate."

He put three twenties on the desk. She filled out the receipt and tore it loose, handed it to him, and asked, "New in town?"

"Yes."

She nodded and pushed the register in front of him. "Sign here. Passing through?"

"Mmm." He signed his name.

"Good. Rotten place."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I don't know. This place attracts all the weirdos. Stick around long enough and you'll see. They're all dropouts, wackos, if you wanna know. All the bright ones either got out long ago or passed through."

"Why do you stay?"

She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "My husband manages the place. We got into town about nine months ago. We're from a nice little town in Oregon—Ashland. Maybe you've heard of it?"

"Yes, very nice. Home of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival."

"Yeah, right. Anyway, Danny answered an ad in the paper and landed this job." She snatched the key off its hook and slapped it on the table. "Community shower down the hall, toilet too. Collect the linen on Sundays. Your room is on the second floor, top of the stairs, turn left, four doors down. Number two hundred seven."

He took the key, picked up the brown suitcase, and started off.

"Goodnight, Mister—" She glanced down at the register. "Newal."

**T**he street door opened as she was returning the receipt book to the drawer, and in walked Brad Hainey. She waved him back sharply. "Stay where you are!" He stopped, took the cigar out of his mouth. Brad got the crooked mouth and the limp from a stroke, the walleye from she didn't know where, and the stench he brought home from the rendering plant across the river.

"I on'y want ma mail," he said hoarsely.

She felt behind her for his box and slapped the magazine wrapped in brown paper on the desk. He started forward, his good eye fixed hungrily on the package, and she knew no power on earth could stop him now. She slunk back into the apartment and leaned against the door, gasping.

"Brad Hainey gives me the creeps." She stared at the desk. Danny was gone. Shaking her head dolefully, she crossed her arms as if she were cold and started for the kitchen. She stopped stiffly at the sound of a muffled shot.

"Danny!"

Moments later her husband walked through the kitchen door mumbling angrily, his .22 pistol in his hand. He frowned and returned to his desk, glancing at her, and put the pistol beside the books. The silence between them became too much. He thrust out his hands in ap-

peal. "What?" he boomed. Then, as if to answer his own question, he wagged a finger toward the back. "You see the mess those damn dogs made?" He was incredulous.

"If you shot one of them . . ." she began wrathfully. "Oh!"

"What!" he demanded.

"As if they don't have enough to deal with, the poor things."

"I'll be damned," declared Danny, and scratched the back of his neck as if he couldn't make any sense out of her.

"They're only trying to find something to eat. Jesus, you used to *like* dogs!"

"By Gawd," he cried, "if you think I'm going to stand by, by Gawd, and let those scroungy bitches scatter garbage all over the damned place . . . well, by Gawd, you got another think comin'." Then he sat down, finished with her.

"Well," she said after an interval, "I think you're coming off your spool."

He appraised her. "And while we're on that subject . . ."

"I'm going to bed."

"Natch."

Kate undressed in the darkness, and for a few minutes she sat on the edge of the bed looking down from the window. The usuals were strewn along the street, in front of the taverns, under the quivering lamps, waiting for something to happen. Someone lay on a bench, and a couple felt one another against a wall. She took a deep breath, sighed, and sank back against the pillow. Her heartbeat, her breath, mingled with the life of the street, and in time she slept.

Kate had her coffee fix down the block at Roper's Café every morning. Mr. Roper was a small balding man with kindly spectacles. He specialized in hash-browns and omelets, and cooked them behind the bar where regulars watched eagerly. His boy sat well right of the counter, peeling steamed potatoes. Kate was disappointed to discover there were no vacant stools, but such was Mr. Roper's popularity.

Mr. Newal was there, standing behind those at the counter, staring intently. Mr. Roper was at his zealous best slinging hash-browns with one hand, cracking eggs over a dish with the other. She joined Mr. Newal.

"Bet you never saw the likes of him," she said.

"Well, good morning," he said with undisguised pleasure. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I have. Such deftness, though, is indeed rare. I have

a table by the window. Care to join me?"

She looked forlornly up and down the counter. "Sure." She followed him over to a table and sat down. "You never told me what line you're in." From out of the corner of her eye she saw Mr. Roper's quiet son wipe his hands on his apron and bring a coffeepot over.

"Just c-coffee, K-Kate?" He turned over the cup that had been upside down on the mat and poured. "Refill, sir?" he asked softly, and cleared his throat.

Mr. Newal smiled up at him and the boy filled his cup. When the boy turned to leave, Mr. Newal leaned over toward Kate and said, "Attractive young man, eh?" He'd said it loudly enough that she was sure Mr. Roper's son had overheard the remark.

"I'm happily married," she stated, blushing, and when she was certain the boy was out of earshot, she whispered, "Besides, he's not at all my type."

Mr. Newal studied his retreat and then returned his attention to Kate. "You were saying? Yes, I remember. I'm a traveling salesman. Work for Brighton's Culinary, selling kitchen utensils. Need a potato peeler, I've got a couple dozen samples."

"Not really."

An old woman shuffled into view on the sidewalk, pulling a small discolored wagon behind her piled high with baskets and boxes. She was clothed in an aged brown tweed coat, a panama hat thick with dust and caved in on one side. She stopped to pick up a cigarette wrapper, turned it over in her hand, and put it in her coat pocket.

"Strange," said Kate, and shook her head.

"Not so strange," said Mr. Newal. "You know—" He leaned forward, "—there are worse afflictions. For instance, take a family man. Now, he seems to have everything going for him: good job, house, family, two cars, couple cats. One night he wakes up, walks into the kitchen, picks out a good sharp knife, and sets about the business of filleting his wife and two children."

"Ugh."

"The Indians had a name for it. Windigo, the demon with a heart of ice—though I suppose by now it has a fancy psychological title. It lodges in the minds of the weak and possesses them. That bag lady is Windigo."

"She seems pretty harmless to me."

"They are not all cannibals. But consider for a moment. Many cities, large and small, have a street, a corner of town no different than this one, which provides a favorable atmosphere for Windigo."

Perhaps a certain type is drawn here—the dropouts and wackos, as you've defined them. Still, I don't mean to suggest that only these depressed areas can be Windigo country; we've seen enough newspaper accounts of people who went mad in the heart of middle-class America. The madness shocks us, there, but it would be no great surprise if it happened here. It's almost expected, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"Some become bag ladies, like that woman. Others ... Look around. You'll begin to see."

"Windigo. I think I understand." Kate thought about Danny.

Danny peeked over the barrel of his pistol. "You cold or something?" He put the pistol down and poured oil from a tin onto a stained rag, picked up the weapon, and rubbed furiously. "You'd think we was in the Arctic."

Kate poked at her fried potatoes with her fork. "Danny, that stuff stinks."

"Oh?" He sniffed and looked at her innocently.

Kate felt a headache coming on and lightly massaged her forehead as she chewed. "You haven't touched your dinner." Then, roused by his silence, she dropped her fork with a clatter onto the plate and slammed her fist on the table. He looked at her in surprise. "Do you have to do that at the table? Do you? Look at yourself! All you think about is shooting those defenseless animals. What's got *into* you?"

He was about to say something; his mouth opened in a snarl. But he suddenly stiffened, glanced at the back door, and furiously began shoving cartridges into the chambers. "They're out there," he said, grinning wickedly. "I'm ready, by Gawd, and I'm going to shoot their tails off, by Gawd, and put a stop to 'em once and for all." With a violent movement he stood up, throwing the chair back, cursing the sound it made, and stole over to the door. Casting a look that warned her to remain silent, he threw open the door and rushed into the night. Kate held her breath.

When he returned half a minute later he leaned against the wall panting, confusion on his face. "Nothing," he breathed. "Nothing there." He put the pistol in his belt and let his hands hang limp. "I gotta ... get back to the books," he said tiredly. He shrugged his shoulders, as if fatigued, and walked over to the kitchen door. "I'm not hungry," he said, and went out.

Kate unbuttoned the front of her sweater as she closed the back door. That night she lay in bed waiting for him. She couldn't sleep.

Street voices drifted in hauntingly through the open window. Her mind went out to them; she envisioned herself aligning with the others outside, and it left her cold. She sat up, closed the window, and reached for the sweater at the end of the bed. She put it on, then lay back. That was much better, but still she couldn't sleep, and now, with the window closed, she felt wide awake.

Danny came to bed later than usual and placed the pistol, for the first time, on the bedside table. He sighed heavily, and they looked at each other across the pillow with the moonlight spilling in through the window. Soon he was snoring vigorously. The walls and the ceilings cracked and creaked and seemed to press inward, threatening to suffocate. At last Kate was moved to reopen the window. The street was no longer muted, and she was able to sleep.

The next morning she passed Brad Hainey on the street as she was on her way to Mr. Roper's. It was odd that Brad should be standing on the street corner when he was usually at work by that time. He motioned to her. "C'mere . . . C'mere . . ." Kate hurried away. She nearly collided with an old Indian walking backward toward her, a bedroll under his arm, but she side-stepped at the last possible second, looking up angrily, then fearfully, into his scarred and weather-beaten face.

Exasperated, she collapsed in the chair at Mr. Newal's table and fished in her purse for her cigarettes. There were none. "Amazing! Wouldn't you know it," she said, taking the one that Mr. Newal had offered.

Mr. Roper's son ambled over to the table and filled her coffee cup. "Why thank you, Joey," Mr. Newal said.

The boy blushed and shied away. Kate didn't miss the lingering look between him and Mr. Newal, and, suppressing her surprise, she said, "You know, I got to thinking about all that Windigo stuff." He lit her cigarette with his lighter. "Thanks. It made a lot of sense."

Mr. Newal put his glass of ice water against his cheek. "I thought you might understand. I have a sense about people."

She pulled on her cigarette. "You must have really been around to pick up on that. I don't know that most people would have. I guess it takes a certain objectivity. When you're there, you can't see the forest for the trees."

"Aren't you . . . hot?"

She shrugged. "I don't give the weather much thought, but now that you mention it . . ." She removed her scarf. "I got something on

my mind. It's about Danny, my husband." She told him about Danny's recent obsession with the dogs. "Now he's bringing that gun to bed with him."

"That is odd," he said.

Suddenly she felt a cry coming on, and shuddered. Tears rolled down her cheek, but she was quick to wipe them away with a napkin. "I'm scared and I don't know what to do."

"Now, now, maybe there is something you can do about it." He looked awkward, a little frightened of her. Then he smiled kindly. "I have it. Why don't you suggest something like binding down the garbage can lids with strong rope. That'll keep out the dogs—unless, of course, they can untie knots."

"Yeah. Danny might have tried that, though, but I'll mention it." She laughed a short laugh. "Maybe." She didn't feel hopeful.

His hand touched her forearm. "I'm sure he'll feel much better once that problem is resolved."

In the window a movement caught her eye. A young long-haired boy had jumped onto the hood of a blue station wagon parked at the curb. The boy was staring down the street, holding up his hand in defense against the sun. Kate strained to see what he was looking at, but the angle wasn't right.

Across the street an elderly, plump couple was stopped—recoiled, it appeared—as if a truck had jumped the curb and was bearing down on them. They were looking in the same direction as the boy on the car. A business-type man with yellow hair was hurrying down the sidewalk in the opposite direction. Kate sat up straight when she saw that his sleeve was splashed with red.

"Wouldja look at that!" she exclaimed.

The people at the counter filed out the door and spread out, some of them between the cars into the street, only to jump back out of the way of a blue and white police car screaming past. They moved out again, only to be forced back by a second car.

Mr. Newal said, "Must be an accident."

Kate thought about Brad Hainey. What had it been about him standing on the corner? She had a premonition that he had something to do with the commotion. "Let's go see," she said, and was up before Mr. Newal could respond.

There were crowds of people on all four corners; others peppered the street or leaned out of windows. Brad Hainey was standing hunched over a prostrate figure in the center of the intersection, a curved knife glinting in his hand. There were police cars on both sides



of him, police standing behind them with drawn weapons, and one cop walking toward Hainey with both hands on his revolver, which appeared to be leveled on Hainey's chest. Brad Hainey moved quickly — to do what, she didn't know. There was an explosion and he went over backward.

Kate covered her mouth with her hand and turned into Mr. Newal's arms. The old Indian that had been walking backward was hopping from one foot to the other, bending, dipping, and chanting, but the only word she understood was *Windigo*.

"Danny, one of the residents told me a way to keep the dogs out of the garbage."

"Yeah?" he said, occupied with putting the mail in the appropriate boxes behind the desk. "What's that?"

"He suggested we might try tying the lids down," said Kate.

"You think I'm an idiot?"

"You tried it?"

"Nobody ties the damn garbage lids back down after they dump their garbage. What the hell do *they* care about the dogs?"

Kate thought this over while she chewed on her lower lip. "Oh," she said at last.

"I'll get 'em," said Danny.

"Oh, Danny, I want to go away," she implored, suddenly yielding to an enormous sorrow. Danny glanced at her. "Please, we can find something else."

He slapped the remainder of the mail on the desk. "You let that business in the street get to you, that's what's the matter."

"It's not just that," she said. "It's you—the way you go after those dogs." *You scare me*, she wanted to say, but his eyes stopped her. His hand brushed the pistol tucked into his belt. He walked over to the apartment door, paused there as if he were going to say something, then he went in. Kate sniffed and picked up the last of the mail. There was a brown package on top addressed to Brad Hainey. She shivered. Brad's name conjured up such terrible images that she didn't notice Mr. Roper's son awkwardly making his way from the front door to the stairs leading to the upper rooms. The floor, which was old, snapped like a twig breaking, and she started.

Joey stopped mid-step, furtively poised, and looked sideways at her. "H-hello, Kate," he said. "Sorry I s-startled you."

"You looking for someone?" she asked breathlessly.

He wiped his hands on his jeans and tossed his longish blond hair

back with a snap of his head. He shrugged. "Well, ah, well, I . . ." He swallowed hard and glanced at the stairs. "Well, Mr. Newal, ah, said it was all right if I visited him, and . . ." His voice trailed off, and there was a long silence between them.

"I don't know if he's in," she said, and put the package under the desk. "But you can check. Go ahead."

The boy looked left and right in his nervousness. "Guess I could." He nodded, and with his mind evidently made up he hurried stiffly up the stairs.

Kate slept fitfully and awoke with a start, the nightmare suddenly a scattered memory, and with pounding heart she found herself alone. She listened, tense, for some sound of Danny. A bottle shattered in the street and there was some shouting, then silence, then the rumbling of a train which went on and on. From her angle, the luminescent clock on the dresser was a blur, but she was certain it was after midnight. Wiping the crust from the corners of her eyes with one hand, she swept back the blankets with the other.

She went to the kitchen, switching lamps on as she went, and found her husband slouched in the open door to the back, his head bowed in an attitude of death, the pistol lying on the floor beneath his limp hand. He was snoring loudly and had apparently fallen asleep at the watch. On the table his dinner sat untouched. She shivered in the cold and approached him. Touching his shoulder, she whispered, "Wake up, hon."

He whined and raised his head, but his eyes remained closed.

"Danny," she called into his ear. "Time to—"

He started violently and stood up with a gasp, hands feeling out in front of him like a blind man. Swiveling around, he blinked rapidly and staggered back against the door frame, his arm raised in defense. His face was ashen, and his terror-filled eyes had an unnatural look which frightened her.

"Are you awake, Danny?"

"Kate?" he shouted past her. He turned, and it seemed he was attempting to scamper up the wall. "Kate! The dogs! The dogs!" As if realizing he couldn't get away, he went for the pistol that wasn't in his belt, then screamed.

"Danny, wake up!" She stepped toward him, but he grabbed the chair and fended her off.

"You're dreaming," she shouted. "Dan—" She stiffened when his eyes fixed on the pistol. He glanced at her and then at the pistol. Then

he smiled grimly and jabbed at her with the legs of the chair as he took a furtive step toward it.

Kate held her breath and backed into the table. As he sank onto his haunches, Kate turned and ran for the door, struck it with her palms, and burst into the living room. Trembling and fighting against the terrifying numbness in her legs, she stumbled past the davenport and chairs, whimpering in her panic, and struggled with the front door. It opened. She swung with it, slammed it behind her, and made for the street door, but changed her mind midway and headed for the stairs, guessing that he would run out into the street.

She knocked lightly but insistently on Mr. Newal's door, huddling against it, praying for him to be quick. She had never before visited the upper floors at this time of night. The gloom-shrouded hallway, with its occasional dim lamp on the walls and chairs blanched by time, was haunting and cold. A door opened below, and she held her breath to listen to the footsteps. They stopped abruptly. She whispered into the door, "Please, Mr. Newal, it's Kate." She took a deep, shuddering breath when a man, naked but for an undershirt, stepped out of a door at the end of the hall and wove his way to the lavatory. His legs were white and bent, and his hair exploded madly out of his head.

"Kate?" Danny called from the bottom of the stairs.

She knocked rapidly on the door. The handle turned. She stepped back as the door opened and Mr. Newal's long face peered out through the narrow opening.

It was dark behind him. His one visible eye looked at her suspiciously, then with recognition. "Kate?"

"Please," she implored, "let me in." He opened the door as wide as his face and brushed his hair back with his hand. His brows were knit with concern.

"What is it?" he whispered.

Kate glanced nervously down the hall. "It's my husband, Mr. Newal. I don't want him to find me."

He opened the door. "Then come in," he said. "Quickly!" For a moment her eyes saw only his grey form standing beside the door in the pale light from the hall, and she started forward. Suddenly, she stopped, as if she'd come up against an invisible wall, her eyes glued to the bed, and she felt her heart pound and her mind recoil. A stench reminiscent of Brad Hailey assailed her like an overpowering gale. She saw the knives beside the horror, and looked at Mr. Newal.

Mr. Newal swept his arm toward the room and said, "Come in."  
"I—I—" She couldn't speak. Her mouth moved, but she couldn't speak.

He put a hand on her elbow and urged her, but she shrank away. "You aren't disgusted by . . . this?" He laughed briefly, looking at her with mad bemusement, but when the laughter stopped he was looking with suspicion. "Are you, Kate?"

"Oh," she said shrilly, "no! I just . . . well, had second thoughts. You know, like maybe I owe Danny another chance." She shook her head. "He's got so much on his mind. I feel like I haven't stood behind him. You understand."

Mr. Newal nodded. "You sure you don't want to come in?"

"Not tonight," she said hastily. "It's really too late and I don't know what I was thinking." She struggled to suppress the nausea rising in her throat. He seemed about to object. "I should talk it out with my husband . . . Shouldn't . . . shouldn't have bothered you with . . . my problems. I'll see you tomorrow at Mr. Roper's. Okay?"

"Yes," he said. "Goodnight, Kate."

"Goodnight, Mr. Newal." She edged into the hall and managed to smile until the door was closed. She turned, took a step, and collapsed onto one knee. Danny was standing at the top of the stairs, one hand on the banister, the other on his hip.

"What the hell you doing?" he whispered.

From her bedroom window Kate watched them putting Mr. Newal into the back seat of the patrol car. She thought, *He knew all along that he was Windigo. Poor Joey, poor poor Mr. Roper . . . to lose a son that way.* She pulled the skullcap down around her ears.

"Goddamned cannibal," breathed Danny from his side of the bed.

Two street-wise youths were smoking on the bus stop bench across the street, watching the police. As the car pulled away from the curb, they gave the cops the finger, and laughed.

Kate listened to them and wondered if they knew. She shivered. The street was cold. It was Windigo that made it that way. She alone knew.

Danny said, "How many sweaters you going to put on?"

Kate turned to him, wrapping the muffler around her neck. "It's cold. Can't you feel it?" She hugged herself through the layers of sweaters and shirts. "I have to protect myself."

# When the Cat's Away ...

## by John Alfred Taylor

*It's time to watch out for the other animals!*

Jean left at noon for the weekend, all the way to Philadelphia for the regional convention. She made sure he had plenty of food—a casserole to heat up, cold cuts and Weight Watchers dinners if he preferred—but for extra consolation Payne bought himself a case of dark Löwenbräu. The heavy, lingering flavor would help fill the emptiness, and with no Friday lecture to prepare he could make a night of it. When the cat's away . . .

Not that Jean minded his drinking, but she had nagged a bit since his last cardiac examination. He kept telling her a little alcohol was good for the heart, and she kept agreeing—"A little, Payne, a little."

Time for supper, he reminded himself as the taffy-colored foam of his third bottle spilled over the rim of the mug. He sponged off the stainless steel drain board and opened the refrigerator. Not the casserole—tuna and noodles was tuna and noodles, even tarted up with capers and basil. Not the expensive tv dinners, not the braunschweiger, salami, pastrami, pressed ham, certainly not pickle loaf. Payne wanted something Old World, something that went with the dark beer. Down there was half a loaf of pumpernickel, and in the door rack was a bottle of ready-made borscht. He put some into a saucepan to heat and made himself a cream-cheese-and-pumpernickel sandwich.

When the borscht was hot, he poured it into his soup dish without bothering with a ladle, but it tasted too sweet. What did Jean add? Extra salt was no help, and finally he tipped the stuff down the drain; the sandwich would be enough.

Payne was at loose ends. He'd been putting off all sorts of things till this weekend, but the November twilight leaned in against the window, blind violet-gray. With just the kitchen light on, Payne felt like a bug in a bottle. Except the bottle was made of shadows, had no fixed surfaces.

There was always the article for *Labrys*—if only he'd refused when Stern asked him to review Broumas's book. Stern thought *Agrionia* was a breakthrough. Payne considered it pretentious nonsense—or worse: Broumas's chapter on the Eating of the God hinted at personal participation. Much more of this, and classical studies would have its own Carlos Castaneda.

But Payne didn't feel like writing. Nor reading either. Maybe there was something on television; he'd barely glanced at the schedule in the morning paper.

Game shows. Reruns of *M\*A\*S\*H*. *Hogan's Heroes*. *The Rockford Files*. Movies long forgotten, best forgotten.

But one of the New York channels had a title Payne thought he recognized. *She-Demon*. Had the distributors considered "demoness" too polysyllabic for their audience? It couldn't be as difficult as the film itself, if Payne's guess was correct.

Yes, it had to be Karpowicz's last, judging from the thumbnail synopsis. He couldn't remember the original Polish title, though the film was almost legendary. Karpowicz had killed himself during the final edit; later, something unpleasant had happened to the female lead.

And the picture had been all but abandoned by the distributors. Before anyone noticed, it had been in and out of the drive-ins as second feature to an American exploitation film.

Midnight. Which meant being up till two or three. Even with no Friday classes, he'd better lay off the beer awhile. Payne went back to the kitchen, rinsed and refilled the percolator, plugged it in. What to do till midnight?

Might as well work on the review after all. When the coffee was ready, Payne took an oversize cup with his initials down to the basement study.

It was always disillusioning to reread a first draft, but these halting paragraphs! Not that he was wrong; Broumas was pernicious, twisting what documentation existed, disregarding any evidence that clashed with his thesis.

It was true that *Agrionia* meant "provocative to savagery," and that the festival had been celebrated with great savagery; Plutarch himself had testified that the priest of Dionysus had pursued the women devotees with a sword, killing those he caught.

Still, the brutality of the act was no proof of Broumas's contention—that it was ritual repayment for an equally savage ritual the night before, when the women had supposedly drawn lots and chosen one

of their sons for victim. And there *was* the tale of the daughters of Minyas who, maddened by the god, had cast lots for which of their sons to kill. . . . But that was myth, not evidence.

Broumas advanced his hypothesis of a secret nocturnal sacrifice, then argued as if this were fact. His assertion that such an atrocity had been practiced in classical times was equally unsupported, mere hypothesizing; his hints that a similar rite continued today were just vulgar grandstanding. (Or would it be better to say "Castanedaizing"? That was good, "Castanedaizing"—maybe he could use that.) Though human as well as animal sacrifice must have been involved before the cult was domesticated; he'd go along with Broumas there.

*Domesticated!* A word counter to the nature of Dionysus, as testified by his other names: epithets like "roaring," "liberator," "render of men," "wild hunter." Often the god was seen as a beast of prey with the shape of a panther or a lynx.

Broumas's book was all nonsense, pretentious theorizing, half-baked history of religion with a hint of personal experience—anthropological science fiction.

The weirdest thing about it was the personal inscription to Stern on the endpaper: *May your reviewer accept this to his good health.* Now what had he meant by that, other than to mystify and impress?

Broumas needed taking down a peg or two, and Payne was just the man to do it. He had the title already: "Castanedaizing the Classics."

It was ten minutes to midnight when Payne looked at his watch again, and for a moment he felt like remaining at the typewriter; but the movie *was* the reason he'd stayed up so late.

Payne opened another beer before he went in to switch on the set with the sound down; credits for the last program were followed by a girl swirling her hair and describing the marvels of a shampoo in dumb show, then three more commercials and a station break. He turned up the sound as the film came on.

Long blond hair was shifting and rising behind the absurd English title; it took Payne a moment to see the hair as floating, partially submerged. Hoping to catch hints of the history of the film, he watched the credits closely, and discovered the original title he'd been trying to remember: *Rusalka*. The Polish word was very like the Russian, both meaning a fatally seductive naiad.

Payne was fascinated from the first; despite the clumsy dubbing, the folk songs of the soundtrack were evocative, and he didn't know

enough to fault Karpowicz's reconstruction of pagan Slavic ritual. Nobody did, he suspected.

The great sacrificial procession to the lake was brilliantly handled; even on the small screen, the beast-masked participants seemed more like a remembered nightmare than actors in a film. For all the green leaves and sunlight, Payne found himself most reminded of the scene in *Alexander Nevsky* where grotesquely helmeted Teutonic knights prayed before battle.

When the chosen maiden turned at the water's edge and begged for mercy from the masked figures, and the camera closed in on the eyes of cat and badger and wolf and hawk and bull, the moment was painfully intense, even before the antlered mask that hid her lover turned blankly away.

Then the massed shapes crowded down and around. When they stood upright again, there was a white-draped figure drifting among its garlands, a pagan Ophelia.

That was it, Payne remembered. That was what had happened to the female lead. She had drowned.

In spite of more dark beer and the way the commercial breaks chopped the film into formless segments, Payne stayed awake till the end, watching as the drowned maiden came back as a *rusalka*, a destroying siren in the moonlight. As each of her murderers succumbed, the camera cut back to their masks, each hanging on a peg: her ex-lover's roebuck visage, the wolf, the hawk, the bull, the badger, the cat.

Payne turned the set off and went up to bed; yet after the light was out, animal snouts and eyes continued to thrust themselves forward in hypnagogic imagery. Although he opened his eyes to the dark in hopes of driving them away, the beast faces came back, massing and crowding—lions, lynxes, tigers, and leopards laughing, snarling . . .

He woke late, with blocked sinuses and a foul taste in his mouth, his stomach sour. What had he been doing last night, other than drinking too much beer? Oh, yes, the movie, Payne remembered; the movie with all the animals.

That was the trouble with no Friday classes to teach: Thursday night you drank like it was Friday.

There was one last antacid in the bathroom, and Payne forced himself to wait till it was fully dissolved before downing it. The sound of its fizzing mingled with the drizzle outside. Thank God there was





plenty of orange juice in the refrigerator; if only he'd had the sense to drink some before he'd gone to bed last night.

All he wanted was a soft-boiled egg. Afterward, Payne read the headlines: a three-car crash on I-79, the marionette show of politics, Ann Landers advising a wife whose husband wore a black-lace garter belt. What was that line from Robinson Jeffers? *All will be worse founded soon*. Next door the haystack-colored tom was yowling to be let in.

Toward eleven the drizzle stopped, the backyard swam in the mist: sparse orange leaves on the girders on the pin oak, saffron-green grass between bruises of unraked leaves.

What to do with himself? Go on with the review, he decided after he'd had a hair of the dog with his pastrami and cucumber sandwich. A promise was a promise, especially to Stern.

Payne stopped on the basement stairs. What was that smell? It made him think of the zoo, of the big cats. . . . He sniffed again. The odor was gone, or had it ever been? Blocked sinuses made the nose untrustworthy.

When Payne turned on the desk lamp, he noticed that he'd left Broumas's book opened at the endpapers. The inscription was still a puzzler. *May your reviewer accept this to his good health*. Crazy.

No point in thinking about it. He pulled the sheet in the typewriter free to read his last few sentences. They didn't make much sense; good thing he'd quit when he had.

Payne sat down, inserted a fresh sheet, started the paragraph again, eager to show up Broumas for the charlatan he was. Writing as if Dionysus still existed, was still worshipped! The present tense was proper back in the fifth century B.C., but in the twentieth century? Payne struck the keys with renewed vigor, determined that reason would prevail.

Professor Broumas even falls back on the long-outdated thesis that *The Bacchae* demonstrates Euripides's deathbed conversion to the Dionysian cult, insisting that the jealous god's victory at the end of the play, childish and amoral though it is, proves that Euripides ended believing in the Olympian system. This is not only nonsense, but selective misreading of the text; *Hippolytus* ends with the protagonist destroyed by the rival claims of Artemis and Aphrodite, but no one claims that Euripides believes in these divine personages. The reader accepts them as representations of human instinctive drives, rival passions. And so it is with the tragedian's Dionysus . . .

Payne looked up. What was that tapping? A bare finger of wisteria at the ground-level window was all. Weak as the late sunlight was, the walls crawled with blue vines of afterimage.

Time for a beer.

Payne saw it the moment he came back down, stopping so suddenly that his beer slopped on the rag rug by the desk. Broumas's book was open to the inscribed flyleaf again.

Silly to let it shake him. He'd merely forgotten looking at the inscription one more time. But his next paragraph came out haltingly; the momentum of his argument was gone.

Time to quit for a while. Before he went upstairs, Payne closed Broumas's book and set his brass frog paperweight on it. This time he'd make sure.

On his next trip to the refrigerator he was surprised to see how little beer was left; that whole shelf had been stacked full. But now there were only one, two, three—he counted them twice—only seven left. And it was Friday afternoon. He needed another case to last the weekend. Why not get it now, rather than have to rush tomorrow?

The sky had turned overcast; the sodium-vapor lamps were already on in the shopping center lot, though there was still daylight enough to make their fierce pinks look small and lost.

It was hard to think of going home to an empty house—even with the new case of dark in his trunk—and harder to think of heating something up. Payne drove to McDonald's, wolfed down a Big Mac and two orders of fries under the fluorescent lights.

An hour later he was still belching, though the Löwenbräu helped some. Time to get back to work.

There was something at the foot of the basement stairs. The brass frog paperweight. Payne stared numbly for a moment before turning to the desk, already knowing what he would see.

Yes.

Again Broumas's book was open to the inscribed flyleaf.

Saturday was bright and sunny, and Payne felt fine except for his stomach.

There were no antacids in the bathroom; he remembered using the last yesterday morning. Bacon and eggs helped some, but Payne kept tasting the eggs afterward. Something else kept trying to rise to consciousness . . .

The brass frog. Last night he'd actually thought something had

moved it and opened the cover of Broumas's book. Might as well get something to settle his stomach. Too bad there was nothing to settle his mind. A dose of common sense, maybe.

As long as he had to drive downtown, he might as well see if he needed anything else. Payne opened the refrigerator. Was there enough orange juice? He reached in to shake the carton, in the process tipping the wine vinegar, which knocked off a bottle of Löwenbräu. He grabbed for it, but too late; bursting on the floor, the dark beer foamed across the pale tiles. He swept up the glass, put down paper towels to soak up the wetness, scrubbed with more till the floor was no longer sticky. Even after he'd rewashed his hands, the smell lingered when he grasped the steering wheel.

On the way, Payne felt a tightness in his left side. Just his pyloric valve, nerves from driving with a hangover. A beer would help that, when he got back.

He parked in the town lot and cut through the alley to Main Street. Turning toward the drugstore, he stared, frozen. Across the street stood a huge rabbit—no, a person in a rabbit costume, holding a cardboard cylinder with a slot for contributions in the lid. Collecting for some cause or charity, he realized. Nothing to be afraid of. But just for a moment, Main Street had seemed like Thursday's movie.

Why was it so hard to breathe?

Up at the corner a man-sized rooster and a lion were talking to a black man in a wide-brimmed hat. Give to the *daimon* of your choice.

"Mister—"

The voice was right next to him, under the darkness of the drugstore entrance. Reaching for him, a leopard, round yellow eyes staring over whiskers!

Pain exploded in his left side, rising up like a dark surf. As he bent on himself, he saw what was in the leopard's hand, the white shape of cardboard and, on it, the symbol of some cause, a red valentine heart . . .

His heart. The man in the leopard suit was asking for his heart. Darkness had Payne in its grip, was squeezing—

Leaning over him were the leopard and the rabbit and Raggedy Ann, her mouth frozen, red spots standing out on white cheeks under red yarn hair. The leopard-man was reaching down with his paw . . .

It was more like being torn. Payne tried to scream as darkness stretched his mouth wide, forced its way in.

# A Chance Affair

## by Mignon Glass

*There were only a few things you could say  
about him: He was fat, overfriendly  
... and oddly forgettable.*

"Just 'cause I ain't eatin' nothin' don't mean I ain't hungry. Don't you think it fer a minute."

Doris Browning looked up from her mashed potatoes and gravy. She hadn't noticed the man at the table next to her, even though his breathing was clearly audible in the quiet, twenty-four-hour restaurant.

He sat in khaki trousers, smiling, and his thighs bulged over the edge of the flimsy chair like slow-drying cement.

*How could I have missed that?* she thought, returning to her plate.

Doris felt she had an excuse, however, for being so unobservant. Two excuses, actually. She had just been released, not forty-five minutes earlier, from "chain gang duty" (as she referred to it). She was one of four women in green smocks who spent an occasional night assembling plastic pots for Fletcher's Nursery. Tonight was one of the long ones; she was dog-tired.

And then, after clocking out and waving good-bye to her co-workers, there had been that small incident outside the nursery gate.

Doris could have sworn she'd seen something dart behind the eastern hemlock, to the left of the sign that read FLETCHER'S NURSERY, WHERE PLANTS AND PEOPLE MEET—something dark and tentacled that moved very fast. But when she stopped to confront it, all she saw were . . . shadows, the dimming of the streetlight.

*Last time old man Fletcher convinces me to pull a double, she thought, hurrying down the sidewalk. I'm seeing demons in the hedges.*

She glanced around; an old woman with a plastic shopping bag was walking briskly up the sidewalk behind her.

"Everything all right, dear?" the old lady asked, suddenly beside her, passing her.

"Uh, yes. I'm just tired," Doris said, walking faster. *And hungry as hell.*

The old woman had nodded, smiled faintly over her shawl-covered shoulder, turned left at the corner, and been gone.

"'Course it *does* look mighty good, but if B. Roy McGaw goes cold turkey he goes *all* the way! Prob'ly make me sick anyways, seein' as how I'm tryin' to reform and all."

"Beg your pardon?" she said to the fat man, suddenly remembering his earlier attempt at conversation.

"Just 'cause I ain't eatin' nothin' don't mean—"

"Yes, I heard *that* part. I think."

"Just thought I'd clue you in, case you was wondering."

"Well, actually, I'm—"

"'Course, most folks don't, till I tell 'em a little bit 'bout myself."

"Please, sir, if you don't mind!"

"Nope. Don't mind at all." The fat man put down the paper napkin he had been methodically ripping to shreds; scratched his head and examined his fingernails; pulled out a strand of his thick red hair and wound it around his finger.

Doris took a bite of her biscuit, eyeing him cautiously. She wiped at her chin where a sticky pool of honey had formed; in the mirror, it resembled a yellow satin bug perching there, like the kind she would find clinging wetly to the bottom of the pothos ivy plants in the greenhouse. Mr. Fletcher could just yank them off and toss them down into the peat, but Doris could never bring herself to touch them. *Dismemberment*, she thought, *like pulling out someone's tongue.*

"I been sittin' here fer nearly an hour, just a-waitin' fer somebody to talk to. Them others that come in just didn't seem . . . right. But you—why you're a different piece of cake, all right. I can tell by the way you eat! Seem to enjoy it, you do." He patted his belly lovingly, smiled faintly. "I *used* to enjoy it myself."

Doris took a sip of coffee, turned away from B. Roy McGaw, and examined the far wall.

"And that's where it all got started, all right. Yep. Just couldn't git me enough. Ever know of a man that could? Huh, lady? Guess I was just about eatin' 'em outta house and home. My papa'd say to me: 'Boy, you're a-growin' out too fast fer me.' " His small green eyes misted over for a moment, and then he continued, "But my mama'd say: 'Oh, quit with your fussin'. He's just a-growin' up is all!' But, like I always say,

there comes a time in a man's life when he's just got to go fer it on his own." He lowered his voice, leaned closer to Doris. She could hear the chair groaning under his weight, and took another bite. "Nature can only protect a man so far. Same goes with a ma and a pa. Know what I mean, lady?"

"No. However—"

"It all started with that dad-blasted little puppy. 'Course, this was a couple years ago."

She looked hopelessly around her. "Cute little thing it was. Well, now that I think back, maybe it did start 'fore then, and I just didn't notice is all. I seen that little dog a-yappin' 'round that hole out back of ol' Hartshorn's barn. Fat little tummy just a-bouncin'. 'Course, I'd had my breakfast already, but you know how us growin'—"

"Listen, fellow, if you're about to say what I think you are, I'll have to leave. After reporting you to the manager!" She glanced around the restaurant: at the two waitresses smoking cigarettes by the cash register; at the cook flipping pancakes; at the lone diners in green Naugahyde booths. As far as she could see, there *was* no real management. *No matter*, she thought, *it's the threat that counts.*

"Don't you worry none. B. Roy McGaw wouldn't want to make you do that!"

"Well, thank you." She stabbed at her pork chop.

"That little feller didn't kick much."

Doris let out a groan.

**H**er pork chop, cold and ribboned with fat, lay on her plate like something fished out of the river, weeks dead. She pushed it behind her potatoes, heard a cough, looked up.

Doris hadn't noticed the fat man before, even though he was sitting at the table just next to hers, staring.

"Seems that little Hartshorn gal done seen me with her puppy. Think she called him Puddin'. Yea, Puddin'." He picked up his tattered paper napkin, wiped his mouth, examined it. "And you know how them little country gals are! Took to screamin' her fool head off, and I tell you, it was a goodly time 'fore I could quiet her down."

*Great*, she thought, *breakfast with the village idiot.* She said, "Are you speaking to me?"

"So, when that little gal took to yellin', I just thought to myself—and it seem to come so natural-like, you know—'Hush up there, you little thing!' And she did! Sure enough, she tucked it in all prim and proper. Then I—"

"You through with that, honey?" The waitress stood over Doris, coffee pot in hand.

"Yes, thanks." She slid her plate across the table; the waitress refilled her cup.

"He bothering you any?" She nodded toward B. Roy McGaw, a grin on her face. "Because if he is, you just let me know!"

"Get on outta here, girl. Found me a sweet lady that'll listen."

"Well," she said, laughing loudly, "whatever it is in that fat old head of yours can't be making much sense. You ready for that cheese-cake now, honey?"

"Yes, please," Doris said.

The waitress, hips swinging in time with the radio, yelled back over her shoulder, "B. Roy, quit your bothering of the customers now. You hear?" She winked.

The fat man gazed conspiratorially at Doris. "That old gal don't know the world's round. And you can dang well bet she don't know nothin' of nature. How it can protect a man."

Doris smiled uneasily, raised her coffee cup to her nose, and breathed in the aroma.

"But then, most folks don't." He hesitated, moving his lips together, frowning. "After that little Hartshorn gal, things got to be a bit more difficult. Seems I'd got me a taste fer it, and that was that. But, you know, sometimes I think God must look out fer me, too. Along with nature. And sometimes I think they're both the same thing anyway."

She turned impatiently toward the kitchen, hoping for a glimpse of her waitress. No such luck.

"Oh, I was careful, don't you know. Helping 'em all scour them fields. 'Course, I'd had to make old Hartshorn forgit 'bout lettin' me in his field just that morning to borrow some wood scraps." He belched, lifted the water glass to his mouth, drank.

"See what I mean 'bout God and nature being in cahoots? Must've found out I had the—uh—appetite, you know, and so they come and give me the gift, so's to even things out. And also, I s'pose, so's that folks won't be so . . . offended!" He laughed, and his belly shook the table.

"Anyway, I figure if I want to live in this world like normal folks, then I'd do best to just give up my eatin' entirely. That way I won't be having to be so dad-blasted careful all the time. But it sure is hard to stop doin' what I guess I was just made to do. You follow?"

"What *are* you talking about?" she said, frowning.

He laughed again, said, "You mean you don't know? Guess I had



you figured wrong after all." The fat man squirmed in his seat, then managed to lean across to Doris's table and grab onto the edge with his fleshy hand. He wavered there, teetering . . . whispering.

Doris gasped . . .

. . . looked up from her coffee cup and noticed a fat, red-haired man at the table next to her. Funny, she had the distinct impression of having seen him somewhere before, but she couldn't quite place him.

"Aaaah," she moaned, as the waitress set a thick square of cheesecake topped with strawberries on the table.

"Why, that sure do look to be tasty!" said the stranger.

"Yes, it does," she replied, stabbing the dessert with her fork.

"I guess most everybody's liable to git off their diet ever' once in a while. Wouldn't you say so, lady?"

"Well, I suppose so. It's only natural." She smiled uncomfortably.

"Yep, is at that." The fat man rose, deposited his shredded napkin beside the empty water glass, reached in the pocket of his trousers, and removed a quarter. He tossed it on the table. "Well, be seein' you."

The waitress slid a grease-stained ticket under Doris's coffee cup, and said, "That B. Roy is about to drive us *all* crazy. Hope he didn't bother you too much."

"What? Him? No, no bother."

"Well, I'm glad. He's been coming in here all the time, talking and carrying on. And I tell you, we're just going to have to get Jerry—that's the manager, Jerry T. Wilson—to tell him one of these mornings, that if he don't order something then he'll have to leave. Says he's on a diet, which is the strangest thing to me! I mean, why would that fool be hanging around a café if he's trying to lose weight? Don't make no sense!" She leaned closer to Doris, whispering, "That's like deciding to give up sex and hanging around a whorehouse!" She laughed and stood back up. "Sounds crazy to me with his talk. Says he likes to at least *see* folks enjoying a good meal. But don't get me wrong now. He's all right. I mean, he does pay us a compliment now and then. Says our food at least *looks* to be the best around! Ain't that a hoot for you?" She took a step and placed B. Roy McGaw's quarter in her skirt pocket. "Crazy fool."

Doris washed down the last of her cheesecake with coffee, paid her check, and stumbled out of the restaurant with a ringing in her ears.

She stepped from the tub, put on her brown flannel robe, walked to the window of her second-story apartment, and glanced outside.

"Now what in the hell is *he* doing here?"

A fat red-haired man stood under the streetlight, looking up.

*I shouldn't be jumping to conclusions*, she thought. *Maybe he lives in the neighborhood.*

"Damn!" She bent over and removed a thumbtack, wedged neatly between the nail of her big toe and flesh. She would *have* to vacuum when she woke up, not to mention a hundred other things. But for now . . . sleep.

Doris dropped the tack in an ashtray, moved to close the curtains.

Funny, she hadn't noticed that enormous red-haired man until now . . .

# Home Visit

by Roger Koch

*There was something subtly wrong over at the Martin place . . . and those dead rats were the least of it!*

The two women had left the welfare department ten minutes ago in Susan Donaldson's '73 Chevette. It was now a quarter till two; ninety-five degrees outside and a hundred and five in the Chevette. The pollution count was bad; the smoke from Susan's cigarette wasn't helping. On any other day like this one, Susan would have cut a few corners in her district and fled to her apartment where, by two-thirty at the latest, she'd be enjoying a beer, her mother's cream cheese dip, and a can of Pringles. But Margaret would keep her out today until at least four-thirty, and then Susan would have to drive her back to her car.

Susan didn't like having people in her car who weren't her friends. Margaret had a funny way of pursing her lips that distorted the bottom half of her face. She was doing it now, while dabbing an itchy eye with a Kleenex wrapped around her index finger.

"By the way," Margaret said, "I want to do your evaluation on Monday."

Susan had been wondering when she was going to get around to that stupid sheet of multiple choice boxes: poor, below average, average, good, excellent, superior, perfect robot. Margaret's handwritten comment at the bottom of last year's report card had read: *Susan's attitude toward her job needs improving.*

Margaret Chandler had been her supervisor for five years; before that, a co-worker. They hadn't exactly seen eye to eye then, but sparks hadn't really started to fly until after Margaret's promotion, when it had become apparent to Susan that Margaret was too infested with the system. If she kept it up, Susan thought, she'd probably get a form named after her. She could smell the Xerox copies now, along with the air pollution.

Susan pretended she hadn't heard Margaret and changed the subject. "How often are they making you do these home visits with us workers?"

Margaret answered with her unflappable tone of voice. "They're not *making* us, Susan. It's not mandatory."

*Sure*, Susan thought, *and this is Portland, Oregon*. She was still stinging from the evaluation remark and wondered if all they did in those meetings was to teach each other how to time cracks like that one. She glanced down at her well-worn copy of *The Source* on the seat between them and tried to remember where she had left off. She couldn't.

They left the downtown area and crossed Liberty Street, which put them in what was known as Rhineland. Susan liked to call it "client heaven." On a scummy day like today this part of the city got to her the worst. It wasn't just the saloons and stripped cars along the streets, or the litter lying about as if a nationally televised parade had just passed through; there was also a pervading atmosphere of incest and degeneracy. Susan had seen enough inbreds that it was easy for her to imagine more: like the man shambling up Potter Street who turned his head and grinned as the Chevette sped past or the child peering through the window above a dirt-blackened furniture store; a child with no nose to speak of, just nostrils, and a twisted mouth. They came to an intersection and Susan flipped her cigarette into a gutter that smelled like something organic was rotting there. *It's gotten worse over the years*, she thought, *really worse*. She switched on a turn signal and headed in the direction of Pullman Street.

"First on the agenda is Arthur Hawkins, a real super guy."

"What seems to be the problem?" Margaret asked.

Susan eased over to the curb behind a rust-flecked pickup truck and pulled on the emergency brake.

"I've sent him two redetermination forms complete with return envelopes. No response. I've made two appointments to visit him. He wasn't home. I thought we'd pay him a little surprise today. Of course I'd rather just cancel the bastard."

Margaret shot her back a look that could have etched crystal at five hundred yards. "Of course you would, Susan, but that's not what the agency is paying you to do, is it?"

"The agency isn't paying me enough to do anything," Susan muttered. "Lock your door."

They walked up two short flights of concrete steps. Susan held her black notebook tight against her blue-jean jumpsuit. *Jesus it's hot*, she

thought. Just perfect for a sweaty little scene among the roaches. She hoped Arthur Hawkins would not be home.

They stepped onto the porch of a dilapidated two-story Victorian. Susan saw something move through the screen door. Margaret saw it too and stopped dead in her tracks. It was a huge short-haired dog with pointy ears, standing taut as a drawn bow and not making a sound. Then Hawkins lumbered up behind it. He was a big man wearing a t-shirt, looking, and probably smelling, Susan thought, like old Swiss cheese.

"Yeah, who are you?"

"Miss Donaldson. I'm from the welfare department."

He waited.

"And this is Miz Chandler. Also from the welfare department."

"Okay, come in," said Hawkins. He made no attempt to shield them from the dog.

They stepped into the living room. It looked like someone had gotten about halfway through repapering the walls and then quit—about ten years ago. Susan sat down on a cloth-covered sofa, as far down from Hawkins as she could manage. Margaret sat in a well-worn easy chair and nervously spread out her dress, keeping both eyes on the dog. Susan kind of enjoyed that until she saw a roach scuttle over her right knee. She flicked it across the room.

"Mr. Hawkins, you haven't sent in your redetermination forms."

Hawkins leaned forward. His stomach rolls rubbed together like weiner-shaped balloons. He rubbed patches of beard stubble with the back of a hand. "Wait a minute . . . Chandler . . . you're the one I was gonna call on Monday. You're her supervisor, ain'tcha?" He nodded at Susan.

Margaret looked concerned. "Yes. What did you want to call *me* about?" She shot another laser beam at Susan.

Arthur Hawkins was smarter than Susan had thought.

"I've been tryin' to call Miss . . . uh . . . Donaldson for days. All I get is 'She's away from her desk.' I complained to the secretary and she gave me your number."

Margaret was in full control now. "It seems, Susan, that you've been having your calls held again."

Susan tried to build a wall around herself.

"It seems, Susan, that we're going to have to move your desk to wherever it is you *are*. Give Mr. Hawkins the form."

Susan prickled all over. She pulled a yellow sheet out of her notebook and handed it to Hawkins.

Margaret stared at her. "Someone will be back next week to look it over and pick it up. Thank you, Mr. Hawkins."

Margaret headed for the door, stepping around the dog. As Susan got up, she caught a glimpse of Hawkins's small son standing in the kitchen shadows between lines of wash.

The heat had turned the parked Chevette into a Kelvinator at four hundred and fifty. Susan opened her notebook and jotted down the day's date. Then she wrote: *H. V. Arthur Hawkins—left re-form. Supervisor Chandler present.* She underlined the last three words five times.

"You didn't even ask him why he wanted to call me. Can't you see he was making the whole thing up?"

Margaret rummaged through her purse for more Kleenex. "We'll discuss this on Monday. Let's go on."

Susan turned the hot steering wheel. "What would you think if I told you something else about Arthur Hawkins? His wife was one of my clients years ago. She said he'd tried to rape their daughter twice—in the bathroom."

"I said we'll discuss it on Monday during your evaluation." Margaret snapped her purse shut and set her mouth.

There were two more scheduled visits. At Lula Mae Palmer's house, a child swung on the once-decorative iron gate in front—but Lula Mae was not at home. They were now on their way to Alice Parker's apartment on Peach Street. Margaret said something, but all Susan heard was the word *agency*.

"You're not listening, Susan. We need to talk seriously on Monday and I think you know why."

"All right, Margaret, so you think my attitude stinks. I'm not entitled to give any opinions, especially on things like that damned school worker calling *me* instead of the truant officer—"

She instantly regretted her words and almost slapped herself. Janie Sue Martin was the last client she even wanted to *think* about until Monday—or forever for that matter. But Margaret had heard enough.

"What about the Martin case, Susan? You haven't done any follow-up on it. The school has been reporting the absence of the Martin children for three days now."

Susan couldn't check her response. "For Christ's sake, do you know how many cases I've got? Don't they ever call truant officers

anymore? I've got enough to do without doing someone else's job."

"I don't think that's what the agency has in mind."

She could feel the chill of Margaret's words as a sweat drop nestled into the corner of her eye. *Calm down, Susie, she thought, you're going about this the wrong way.*

"She's scary, Margaret. She looks like a genetic mistake; like the result of a whole generation of inbreeding. She came to the office last year. You were off that day but just ask the others. Ask Halliday if he remembers. She crept out the whole floor. Her eyes were opaque and her hair stringy like an old corpse. Her mouth was all sunk in and —"

"Susan, that will be enough! We have more to discuss on Monday than I thought."

Susan relinquished and turned left at the intersection of Peach. Alice Parker was one of Susan's more talkative clients; a bit touched, as they say, a counselor's nightmare. Susan always dreaded her visits with Alice. On the last one, the woman had pinned her down for an hour and a half, crying about her life and her family who didn't care. But now Susan felt relieved she had made another appointment for today. By the time they would get away from Alice, Margaret would be ready to get back to her car and the Martin case could be indefinitely postponed. *Thank God it's Friday*, she thought.

Alice Parker's apartment was in a cement-block complex that looked like a bombed-out school building. They walked past a row of broken mailboxes, stepping over splintered two-by-fours and pieces of pop bottles.

"Here it is. Number three," Susan said. She could hear a television through the apartment door. She gave her customary three quick knocks. Someone on the television said *I'll take women in film for a hundred, Jack*. She knocked again. *Come on, Jokers*, said the television. *Come on, Alice*, Susan thought. She knocked again.

"I don't think she's home," said Margaret.

Susan fought back an overpowering urge to strangle. "She *has* to be home. She looks *forward* to my visits. She *knows* I'm coming today." *Nice going*, she thought. *Of all the times to break an appointment it has to be today, you stupid fucking whining bitch.*

The door to the adjoining apartment opened and a woman in a robe and shower thongs leaned into the hallway.

"She ain't home. She got sick and somebody came to get her."

Susan looked into the apartment and saw a bunch of men playing

cards in the kitchen. Two naked children were crawling under the table.

"Yes. Thank you. Do you know where they took her?"

"Nope," said the woman. Then she closed the door.

Susan let out a deep breath and tried to smile it off. "Well, I guess that's that. I'll see what I can find out next week." She hated herself for even trying to score any last-minute points with Margaret.

They went back to the car in silence. Susan began to scribble in her notebook and noticed that her pen was shaking like the needle of an oscilloscope. She tried to peek at her watch, but her left arm wouldn't cooperate.

Margaret fanned herself with a copy of the staff newsletter. "It's only ten minutes to three. I think we'd better try a visit to the Martin woman."

Susan flushed. "Why don't we go back to the office. You could even start my evaluation if you—"

"Susan, we already signed out WNR."

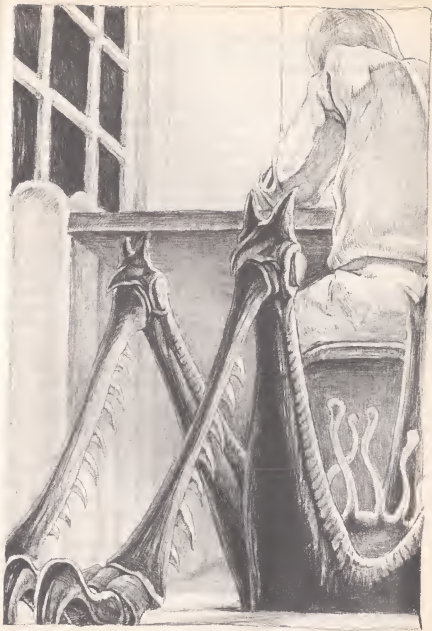
WNR stood for "will not return." If she could find another job she'd paint those stupid letters on the top of her desk.

"Then let's go have a beer. Christ, Margaret, you're human too, aren't you? You're hot and sweaty. You've put in your week. And you've gotten what you wanted out of *me* this afternoon."

Margaret raised both eyebrows and smiled like a dentist to a frightened patient.

*So much for the human part*, thought Susan. Now she'd really asked for it. She tried to think how Jake or anybody at the Riverview could convince her that she hadn't really blown it this time. And to top it all off, there was no way of getting out of the visit to Janie Sue Martin and maybe even all of her five children. It suddenly occurred to her that something about what she had just thought didn't sound right. Then she remembered. *Six*. There were six children now. She had received that anonymous call from a woman in the neighborhood claiming that Janie Sue Martin was pregnant. Susan had picked up a kind of edginess from the caller as if she were suggesting Susan do something about it. Then she'd hung up and all Susan could think of was *Who in the world could ever have gotten it up for Janie Sue?* It was impossible—but so was immaculate conception. And Janie Sue already had five kids. Susan shivered. Last month, the anonymous neighbor had called back saying the child had been born. Susan had reluctantly trudged herself and her "attitude" up to Water Street for a visit—but that was as far as she'd gone. When she'd seen where she





had to go to get to Janie Sue's house, she'd quickly changed her plans. The house was on the slope of a hill; it had rained that day, and the only way down was a steep path of soupy mud through several other backyards.

The one consoling thought she had was that at least Margaret would have to cope with the visit, too. As they came closer to Water Street, Susan tried to deal with her anxiety. Margaret wasn't enjoying this any more than she was, except that she knew she was getting to Susan. All the other workers had cases they ignored, but nothing was usually said about it unless the supervisor had it in for the worker. So why not let her suffer too? If she talked Margaret out of the visit, she would have to make it alone next week. She gloated: *Either I suffer through this alone next week or you suffer through it with me today, you bitch.*

It was after they parked and got out of the car that Margaret began to show signs of weakening. Water Street came to an abrupt end a few hundred feet ahead. It began again at the bottom of the hillside, down by the river. Margaret looked down at the obstacle course that lay ahead of them and frowned. Susan pointed to the Martin house. It looked like something one would find deep in the Okefenokee swamp at night: a twisted, sinking shamble of a house.

"That's it," Susan said.

Margaret stood transfixed and spoke softly with genuine human emotion. "Where are all the people who condemn buildings like these?"

Susan snickered. "They're all in meetings trying to decide when to have their next one. Gee, Margaret, you should have worn your jeans. Come on. I'm not working overtime."

They started down the path.

From a back window of one of the houses that faced on Water Street someone stared at them.

"Don't look now, Margaret, but I think we're being watched."

By the time Margaret found the window there were two more faces.

"Makes you feel right at home, doesn't it?" Susan was now about five yards ahead of her. *No sir, not a fun day for you, is it, Maggie old girl*, Susan thought. She was beginning to enjoy herself.

They crossed under three washlines and passed an evil-smelling pile of trash. Susan thought of "Heap," an old *Mad Magazine* takeoff on horror movies about a polluted heap of garbage taking human

form and mulching through the Okeefenokee. On her left she saw a small boy crawling through a twisted maze of corrugated sheet metal. He didn't have a nose; one of the Martin children.

She was about to point him out to Margaret when a huge German shepherd sprang off the ground, inches from Margaret's face. It nearly broke its neck on the heavy chain. Margaret gasped and fell forward onto the path. She clutched her face and rolled over twice. The shepherd made the same leap over and over, but the chain was securely fixed to a corkscrew in the ground.

Susan flinched but stood her ground. "He can't get you. You okay?"

Margaret got up and smoothed out her cotton-polyester dress. Her right palm was scraped and both knees were dirty. She looked like a six-year-old on a Sunday picnic.

Susan squinted at her through the afternoon sun. "You just going to stand there or what?"

Margaret looked at the dog on the straining chain, set her mouth, and started walking toward Susan.

Then the Martin boy darted out of the sheet metal, clutching a stiff six-inch rat by its tail. Margaret gasped again. The boy stopped and stared at them with opaque blue eyes. Margaret took three steps backward. The boy turned, scampered up the Martin porch, and disappeared through the door. Susan saw Margaret go pale. *Cute little bugger, isn't he?* she thought. *Betcha can't wait to meet his mom.*

Margaret's voice betrayed some good old-fashioned panic. "I think we'd better go back, Susan."

Susan felt herself coming to a boil. "But what would the *agency* say, Margaret? Is that *really* what they'd have in mind?" She spat out the words like an overheated actress doing Edward Albee.

Susan stepped onto the porch. The wood felt soft and splintery, like fallen palm leaves after a light rain. Susan saw Margaret's hateful stare and thought of the impending evaluation on Monday; only one winner would walk out of the office. Susan could almost taste victory.

"Come on. We have a job to do."

Margaret came up on the porch.

Susan knocked on the open door. There appeared to be no one in the front room. She stepped inside. *Kids staying home from school and playing with dead rats: a day in the life of a social worker*, she thought. Yuk.

There were two chairs and a couch. Stuffing bubbled out of the cushions like pus. On the floor, directly in front of her, was a pile of dung. Susan thought of the old joke the right-wingers at the employ-

ment office liked to tell about the clients: *My landlord don't do nuthin'. My kid crapped in the hall three days ago and he ain't cleaned it up yet.*

Margaret stood in the doorway.

Susan held a finger to her lips. A sound, like a dog lapping up water, was coming from one of the bedrooms. She moved toward it.

"My God, Susan! Don't go in there!" Margaret was losing her voice. She ran to Susan and grabbed her by the jumpsuit.

For an instant they both looked into the bedroom. Margaret screamed and dug her fingers into Susan's neck. What they saw was impossible. The thing in the bed with Janie Sue, gnawing and sucking on a dead rat, was far worse than anything Susan had ever seen. It made the rest of the brood look like the Von Trapp children, as they stood around the bed, beaming at their mom; each of them holding . . . offering . . . dead rats by the tails.

Margaret dashed back across the living room—but not quite all the way. Floor planks splintered and then gave way. She reached up and grabbed at nothing. A balled-up Kleenex dropped as she opened her fist. Then she was gone, and her scream, before she hit bottom, carbonated Susan's blood.

In the next moment Susan made her biggest mistake of the day. She stopped at the edge of the hole, trying to see if Margaret was all right. Stupid-assed Margaret. She couldn't see anything, but the corner of her eye caught the Martin children, now ratless, scuttling through the bedroom door. She flailed out at the oldest and struck him on the side of his head. The notebook fell out of her hand. Arms circled around her legs like tentacles around a deep-sea diver.

She cried out, "No! Holy Jesus God in Heaven no!"

She went through the hole head first and landed on Margaret's breast, which already teemed with tickling, invisible roaches. Margaret was either dead or in shock; she didn't make a sound. Susan slapped away in a frenzy at the roaches, making sounds in her throat she'd never made before.

It didn't take long for her eyes to see through the darkness of the cellar and pick out the thing that was crawling in her direction. She screamed and looked up through the hole. Janie Sue and her children peered down at her with toothless fascination. As the foul shape reached her and chomped through her leg, all she could think of was the children . . . and how they favored their mom.

Not like the thing in the bedroom . . . which was the spitting image of its dad.

# Mistral

## by Jon Wynne-Tyson

*When the wind known as 'Le Mistral' blows,  
memories return, masks are torn away,  
and horror unsheathes its claws.*

If you know the South of France (what most people mean by the South of France, that is—the Côte d'Azur), you may know Saint-Tropez. But maybe not. Users of what is loosely called the Riviera are extraordinarily insular. Even with the autoroute—perhaps because of it—the country west of the Esterel is as foreign to many who favor the region to the east as Perth is to Penzance.

But not to me. I have seen all I want of the French coast from Marseilles to Menton, and you can have Nice, Monte Carlo, and the rest with a pound of tea. They have nothing on Saint-Trop.

I am prejudiced, of course. Partly, perhaps, because enjoyment of today's Côte d'Azur is an art, not a choice easily bought by casual application to the tour operators. Nowhere along that expensive littoral is it more essential to exercise that art than in the area of Saint-Tropez. Where Cannes and Monaco have something to offer at almost all times of the year, Saint-Trop demands from the visitor the approach, the reverence, of the connoisseur.

In high summer, for instance—the most popular and unsuitable period—you need to be a rabid bon vivant, a truly *person* person, to endure the sheer excess of humankind in a region offering no outlet for urban overspill. In the winter, on the other hand, none but a misanthropic masochist with an inordinate concern not to miss the first golden promise of mimosa is going to suffer the bleak desolation of empty streets so often scoured by that most unpleasant of God's varied gifts, the mistral.

"Unpleasant," for many, is putting it mildly. Some, the purists—those likely to hold that the Riviera lies only between Nice and Genoa

—say that nowhere west of Cap Ferrat is really habitable, so frightful is that cold dry wind that roars down the Rhone valley to spread its fury over Provence, proving to pursuers of the *dolce vita* that Nature alone is truly egalitarian. Others, less hysterical, chance wintering in Cannes and Antibes. But farther west, beyond the Esterel, there you have to know what you are about. There you have to have some special reason for defying the natural and man-made perils so inadequately repelled by the Massif des Maures.

One of those special reasons, of course, is the concentrated pulchritude of Saint-Trop. Not only are its summer girls beautiful and plentiful, but they show a lack of inhibition less apparent in such self-conscious resorts as Cannes and Nice than on the cleaner beaches and the open waters of Saint-Trop. Not for nothing has that delightful little town so long been the haunt of writers, artists, and the least stuffy of media persons.

Even a few miles down the coast in Port Grimaud—that pseudo-Venetian aqua-suburb for retired civil servants and bank managers from Croydon and Saint-Cloud—nubile girls, still with ponies in Surrey meadows, bare their breasts the moment they set foot on a Gulf-bound yacht or motorboat.

Be that as it may, the last person I expected to meet there, even in June, was Ambrose. One of the connoisseur months, June is a little ahead of the worst of the mob, a time when one can sit at a café table in the Place des Lices, enjoying the cool shade below the huge plane trees, listening early and late to the click of *boules*, watching through the hotter hours those who forsake the quayside and the expensive refreshments at Senequiers to explore the quieter streets and squares. In June, before the French rush like lemmings to the coast, the weather can be exquisite. But in no month of the year can one be sure of avoiding the mistral.

Ambrose had not seen me. His gaze was on the dry brown powdered earth of the square. His shoulders were more stooped than I remembered, his expression verging on the gloomy. Seeing that he was literally attached to the sexiest woman I had seen in years, this seemed odd.

"Hey! Ambrose!" I called.

He looked up.

"Oh, hallo, Charles," he said. His voice lacked animation, let alone surprise. Our last meeting might have been five days back, not five years.

"I didn't know this was your beat and season," I said.

He compressed his lips and wrinkled his brow in a facial shrug. He certainly looked older, but except for an unremembered scar on his neck, much the same dapper, neat little man, a head shorter than myself.

"It's not really," he said, "but Angelina likes the warmth."

I smiled, feeling that an introduction was called for. On the few times we had met since school days, Ambrose had invariably been accompanied by beautiful women, none of whom he had married, so far as I knew. I had never known him well—he was too much of a woman's man for that—and if it had not been for the school link I might not have numbered him among remembered acquaintances. As with relations, those one has known at school are not necessarily the people one keeps up with.

"Well, have a drink," I said.

Ambrose introduced me. "This is Charles Massingham. Charles, meet Angelina." He gave her no second name.

Angelina offered me a slim, brown hand. Her wrists bore several thin gold bangles and her nails were painted the tawny brown of dried blood. She did not grip my hand, yet I felt through her fingers a strange, urgent strength, and this was apparent in the way she moved. Her figure was flawless, her body extraordinarily supple. I wondered if she was a dancer. She wore a bronze-gold jump suit that fitted her perfectly, emphasizing the sparseness, the alert animality of her body. Her long legs—like me, she was inches taller than Ambrose—were flattered by fine high-heeled gold sandals that must have cost the earth, and her black hair was drawn back from a face that was more feline than human, though of exquisite delicacy and proportion. The only imperfection, though it detracted nothing from her sensuality, was a slightly overfull lower lip, imparting a faint air of smoldering challenge. She reminded me of one of the great cats—a cheetah, perhaps. This impression was strengthened by the fine chain leash that was attached to her left wrist and held by Ambrose, for all the world as though he were walking an Afghan or saluki.

I carefully avoided a second glance at the gold leash. Ambrose had always enjoyed reactions from those more unimaginative and staid than himself. Even at school, in the days when I was far more interested in *The Boys' Own Paper* and the egg-laying habits of peewit and sparrow hawk than in the thin dark ice of human relationships, Ambrose was a living legend to the older boys. In fact, his precocity did little for his formal education: for having made it in the shrubbery

with Saint Bartholomew's singularly pretty matron, he was expelled without a moment's hesitation by the matron's husband, who as it happened was the headmaster, and never got round to taking the exams that might have channeled his energies toward a university, a solid job, and a more serious lifestyle. To make matters worse, his father died about then, leaving investments and property that provided his son with an all too adequate income for the rest of his life. Riches and randiness: a heady combination few survive.

I had reached that time of life when, meeting a beautiful woman, I could take her or leave her, so to speak. Well, leave her, then, without actually taking. You know what I mean. But I had to admit that Angelina was something special. She sat at the table almost gingerly, as though unaccustomed to a chair, so lightly in contact with it that I felt she might have sprung away through the plane trees at the slightest provocation—had it not been, of course, for that slender gold leash. Her eyes were watchful, never still; alert, restless, seeking. Yet seeking what?

"Well," I said unimaginatively, "this is quite a surprise."

"For me too," said Ambrose. "I didn't suppose you still came out here."

"I'm flattered you've considered the matter," I said.

The waiter appeared.

"What will you have?" I asked.

"Angelina likes orange juice. The real thing. I'll have the same." Angelina seemed to accept his choice.

"What do you want in it?" I asked Ambrose.

"Nothing. Just as it comes."

I blinked. I had never known Ambrose to drink anything non-alcoholic. Even at school he had a reputation for rather good wines. "Clarets, dear boy," I remember him saying as we waited to bat in some house match, "are really the best for your digestion. Go for the Médocs and you will have little trouble." It never struck me in those days that his sophistication could be anything but innate.

"Right," I said, and ordered.

Angelina stroked Ambrose's arm with her free hand and looked into his eyes. Except for a murmured "'Allo" when we shook hands, I had not heard her speak.

"I mus' go Hawaii for lily time," she said mysteriously.

"Must you?" Ambrose replied. "Very well, then; come straight back."

I had noticed the small key on the fine chain round his neck, and



now he used this to unfasten the little padlock that held the leash to the lowest and most robust of the bangles on Angelina's wrist. She slid silently from her chair and disappeared into the cool depths of the café.

"Italian?" I asked.

"Hungarian with a dash of Spanish."

"Some mix!"

I clenched my fist, grimacing, and punched the air, holding my forearm rigid in a gesture familiar to men, but one I had not used for many years. Ambrose nodded. The old animation had definitely gone.

"I know what you're thinking. She's not all body, though."

"No?"

"No. You may not believe it, but she has a lovely nature. Very tenderhearted. Wouldn't hurt a fly. Loves animals. We were with Brigitte only yesterday."

"Bardot?"

He nodded. "She's intelligent, too. Quite a thinker. Angelina, I mean."

"Well, you never know," I said.

"She's very environmentally sensitive."

"Really? Low technology? Alternatives?"

"Population control, especially. She thinks our numbers should be drastically reduced until we have small communities living only in suitable climatic areas."

"Not the kind of thing the politicians would want to follow up," I said.

The waiter brought their orange juices.

"Are you quite sure you'd like nothing stronger?" I said. "Before Angelina returns. A little gin, perhaps?"

He shook his head. "I've made a deal."

"Who with? Alcoholics Anonymous?"

"With Angelina."

"She doesn't look the type to exert a reforming influence."

"As you said, 'you never know.'"

"Well," I agreed, "it's probably no bad idea to watch things a bit once one's in sight of one's fifties."

"That's what Angelina says. She says she wants me fit or not at all."

"You don't think," I said, "that in this climate, with a girl like that, at our sort of age . . .?"

Ambrose gestured, a little impatiently.

"It's an attitude of mind, Charles. You've given up too soon."  
 "Not given up exactly," I replied. "I'm still married to Christine."  
 "Well, there you are. We make our beds."

I changed the subject.

"Are you ever in London?"

"Seldom. Last July, for two weeks, but we move around. Angelina won't winter in Europe. It has to be the Caribbean, the Seychelles—that kind of thing."

"An expensive girl."

"But worth it. I could tell you—"

"Don't. I may have given up, as you put it, but the heat still turns one on a little."

"I'm glad to hear it," Ambrose said. "Angelina thrives on heat. She says we were intended for subtropical temperatures. That was what I was about to tell you. She really has a most inquiring mind."

"But the other side . . . ?" I asked. "Surely . . . ?"

"Of course. That too. But there's another face to the coin, you know, Charles. Sex isn't everything."

"No," I said. "No, indeed. How true."

The conversation flagged. The waiter, hopeful, handed me the menu. I looked at my watch. Ambrose looked at his, then toward the dark interior of the café.

"Seeing to her face," he said.

"It's getting on. How about lunch here? It's adequate."

Ambrose glanced at the menu.

"I don't know there's much for us."

"Steak?" I suggested. "Veal? The fish isn't bad."

"We . . . I . . . don't eat like that any longer," he said.

"Problems?"

I'd had some myself. All part of the aging process. Mushrooms and sweet corn seemed immune to the digestive juices.

"Not really. More a . . . reorientation."

"You could have an omelette."

"Do they do a good salad?"

"I'm sure they *could*," I said. "What about the cold plate?"

Ambrose came out with it.

"We don't eat meat."

My memory was that he ate little else.

"There really have been some changes," I said.

"Angelina feels it's for our own good. Meat doesn't suit her. She's for whole food, grains, fruit, nuts—that kind of thing. She says it's as

necessary we eat the right things as that we don't live in cold climates."

"Why so much concern about the cold? Do you catch chills easily?"

"No, but Angelina is—how shall I say?—better adjusted in the heat. Warmth and a bland diet is what she needs. The cold prompts her to eat things that, well, disagree with her. When the mistral blows, we stay indoors."

"It all sounds a trifle restricting," I said.

A worried look crossed his face.

"It *can* be a bit of a strain, actually. Angelina needs constant encouragement to . . . be herself."

"Nasty wind, the mistral," I agreed, not quite knowing what to say about his last remark. "Gets into the bones. The sirocco can be unpleasant, too, and I'm told people can go potty in that wind they get on the northern slopes of the Alps."

"The *föhn*," Ambrose said. "They call it the 'chinook' in the Rockies. It cools at the saturated adiabatic lapse rate as it reaches the peaks, then dries as it descends on the leeward side, gaining heat."

"I've never heard it better put," I said.

He nodded. "Mind you, 'it's an ill wind . . . ' Angelina really turns on in the mistral."

"You mean . . . ?" I said.

He nodded again. "All I can handle until it gets warmer again."

"Here she comes," I said.

Angelina's jump suit was more open than before, exposing a delicious area of brown skin and just enough of each plump breast to . . . well, never mind; it was one o'clock and very warm indeed. She approached slowly, like a cautious cat not wanting to draw attention to herself. As she sat down she extended her arm submissively toward Ambrose, who attached the chain to her wrist. I wondered what the women's libbers would have thought about it all. I noticed that her nostrils were dilating and contracting gently, like an animal scenting its prey. Although she had walked only a few yards, she was panting quietly, her small pink tongue a little extended. She was wildly beautiful — and I mean "wildly"—despite that submissive act to Ambrose. Old and almost-forgotten tremors threatened to disturb my peace of mind. I shifted on my chair.

"So how long are you here, Charles?" Ambrose inquired, toying with the *crudités*, which the waiter had brought with a promptness suggesting no special preparation.

"Another week. July and August are unbearable. Besides, I hate to miss the English summer in our cottage. The scabious will be flowering on the Downs soon—the most beautiful color in the world. With the corn ripening, the real woods to walk in . . ."

"You were always a one for nature," Ambrose said. "At your own level."

"Well, here it's all over. Nature is resting. Don't you miss England in spring and summer? The larks? The cowslips?"

He nodded. "I suppose so. One certainly knows where one is with cowslips."

"I can't think what one would do out here," I said, "once everything dries up and the trippers descend like locusts. The sailing fraternity tests the *savoir vivre* of the most gregarious."

"I read a lot," Ambrose said.

"That's another change in you, then," I said. "You were always too busy doing . . . other things."

"One matures," Ambrose said.

"What do you read? Bond stories? Agatha Christie?"

"Not often. More, reincarnation, Eastern religious thought."

"Good God!" I said.

A sudden swirl of air swept through the Place des Lices, a welcome disturbance of the almost solid heat, yet a warning of less pleasant things to come. I looked up from my plate at Angelina, for I thought I had heard a sharp in-drawing of breath. She was gazing up at the rustling leaves of the plane trees, her fork poised above her plate, her nostrils contracting and dilating again, but more forcefully than before. Her food looked so dull—just raw vegetables and a small portion of cream cheese.

"Do you never eat meat?" I asked her.

She shook her head slowly.

"She hasn't for a very long time," Ambrose said. "She probably couldn't even keep it down."

"Is that right?" I asked Angelina. "It would make you sick?"

She shrugged and grimaced, a half-smile making her face even more enchanting.

"Here," I said, "see if Ambrose is right."

I sliced a corner off my steak and offered it to her on the knife's point. It was rarer than I really enjoy. She allowed me to place it between her parted lips, and I noticed how sharp and slightly retracted her white teeth were as they closed on the meat. I felt she was being polite rather than of a mind to undergo the test, but she chewed obe-

diently, reflectively, finishing it sooner than I expected. I cut another piece.

"More?" I said.

She took it willingly enough, then another. At the fifth piece Ambrose looked alarmed.

"Steady. That's enough. You know it's not good for you, Angelina."

Her eyes turned from mine to his, her smile disappearing. She chattered at him, fast, in what I took was Hungarian, her eyes burning, her lips hardly moving.

"It's still appallingly hot," I said. "Why don't you come back to my villa for coffees? It's cooler up in Gassin. I'm due for drinks on a gin palace in the port, so I can run you back later."

"I'd like that," Ambrose said.

His instant acceptance surprised me. As I say, we had never been close, yet I felt he was quite glad we had met up again. Angelina seemed less keen. She stroked his arm and looked into his eyes, speaking with her own rather than in words, though from her throat came a strange pleading noise that was almost a purr. But all he said was: "Just for a little while."

In the car he started to talk about reincarnation, asking me my views on transmigration and karma. I said I had not thought much about them, which was true. I noticed the scar on his neck reddened as he warmed to his subject.

I had taken the villa from friends who escape the mixed blessings of the Côte d'Azur from June until September. It was beautifully situated to the west of the village, with a fine view of the main range of the Massif. The terrace was a mass of oleanders and geraniums, with nothing beyond but the far hills across the falling wasteland of ilex, cork-oak, pine, and scrub. The breeze was more positive and cooler than in town, but not yet strong enough to be uncomfortable. I sat Ambrose and Angelina in the cushioned chairs and went inside to make coffee.

When I reappeared with the tray, all was clearly not well. They were quarreling in low tones and Angelina was pulling against her leash, her eyes flashing, her extraordinary nostrils registering more than her words, which were unintelligible.

"Charles, I'm sorry, but I think we'll have to leave," Ambrose said. "Angelina's rather unhappy about this wind."

"I hoped you'd enjoy the coolness," I said.

"That's the problem. Below a certain temperature she's never quite

herself, and the mistral demands certain measures . . . I think we really must get back. Our villa's very warm and sheltered."

"Of course," I said. "I'm sorry you have this difficulty."

"And we're sorry about the coffees."

"I tell you what," I said. "Take my car. I've friends in Gassin who are going into Saint-Trop this afternoon, and I've some shopping to do before the party. They can pick me up. If you leave the car in the Place des Lices, I can collect it later. I'll show you where to leave the keys."

Ambrose didn't let Angelina off her leash, even in the driving seat. Because of my car's right-hand drive, he had to switch wrists so that she could sit beside him. He made sure the passenger door was locked, then told her to get in across the driver's seat. She was very restless, almost fearful, and made sounds from her throat that were even less like speech than those she made before. I could see that Ambrose was tense and worried. It was quite a relief when they drove off down the winding minor road toward the N98.

Tony and Janet Turner seemed glad to give me a lift. They had their own problems, mostly of trying to keep together an unsatisfactory marriage by a frequent change of geography. They were rich enough to keep four small properties in different parts of the world, and they spent about three months in each. Others' company broke up their bickering. As we drove toward Saint-Tropez, the car rocking in the wind that now howled between the hills, I told them something about Ambrose and Angelina.

"I think we've met them," Janet said. "Yes, I'm sure we have. In Grimaud, at the Brothertons'. He's short, very smooth."

"Bit of a lady-killer," Tony said. "I remember. The girl was absolutely terrific."

Janet sniffed. She did a lot of sniffing. "That depends on your taste in such matters."

I was sideways on and slightly to the rear of Tony's grin.

"I think she could be quite a handful," I said.

"Mmmmm," Tony agreed lasciviously, gripping the steering wheel hard enough to drive the blood from his fingers.

"There's something almost . . . untamed about her," I said.

Janet sniffed again. "Pretty near to the jungle, if you ask me."

I leaned forward from the rear seat, peering through the windscreen.

"My God!" I said. "That's my car."

It *had* been, anyway. What I now owned looked destined for the scrap yard. It was piled up against the concrete wall of a storm pipe that ran under the road, on a nasty little bend.

Janet paled. "Maybe they're still in it. Maybe no one's been along."

"Then for Christ's sake, woman," Tony said, "we must do something about it."

The car was empty, the steering wheel bent, the windscreen shattered, the bonnet accordioned. Some drops of blood on the dashboard and the driver's seat were still tacky.

"If police or ambulance had been, they'd have left warning notices," I said. "Or someone on guard until the recovery truck arrived."

Janet frowned. "Then where are they?"

"God knows," I said. "They only left forty minutes ago. Look, I'm sorry, I think you'd better go on without me. I feel I should make a search. They may have been injured and wandered off in a daze."

"We'll help," Tony said. "Of course."

"Then perhaps Janet could stay in the car in case anyone comes by," I said.

The road was steep and the land sloped away from it, a maze of wild scrub and underbrush with occasional pines and outcrops of rock.

"It's no spot to be lying out with injuries," Tony said. "Least of all in this bloody wind."

"If you'll take the area to the south," I said, "I'll work north from the cars. Perhaps if we cover the ground in parallel strips . . ."

After twenty minutes I found a piece of Ambrose's shirt. A little further on I found Ambrose. I recognized him by his shoes; much the same price bracket as Angelina's. Where his nose and eyes had been was a fly-inviting quagmire of blood and torn skin. A missing ear had left an untidy hole that oozed gently into the mica-speckled shale of the rocky hollow in which he lay. His light clothing seemed to have been torn from his body, and I saw that all the smaller (I don't say minor) extremities were missing. As for his throat, it was simply not there; only a hideous gape of raw flesh with a protuberance of gristle I took to be his Adam's apple. I am not a squeamish man, but the undigested remains of my *Place des Lices* luncheon ended up in the scrub-oak near Ambrose's mangled left hand. Of Angelina and the leash there was nothing to be seen.

Nor was she ever found. I have often pondered on the incident,

wondering what it was that Ambrose might have told me had we had longer together, recalling his untypical interest in Eastern beliefs, his apparent knowledge of the strange winds that can wreak such changes in human temperament, Angelina's animal restlessness, those glimpses of something not susceptible to normal explanation.

But then mine is not a psychic or complicated nature. I prefer rational explanations to overimaginative speculation. Nevertheless, when the wind gets up and I am alone—and that is most of the time now that Christine has died and I come out to Gassin more often—I go out onto the terrace and look across to the distant hills of the Maures. And something in me tells me to walk off into the scrub in search of Angelina, who I know cannot possibly still be there. And something else in me, which invariably wins, tells me to come indoors, to close the windows and the shutters, and to lose myself in books until the mistral has blown itself out.

I've become quite absorbed in Eastern ideas, incidentally. Reincarnation, karma, that kind of thing. From a purely intellectual standpoint, of course.



# Harry's Story

## by Robert H. Curtis

*The situation was as simple as an old-time horror comic. Unfortunately, Harry was a bit simple, too!*

I feel bad because I'm always making trouble for people. I know the reason, too. It's because I'm simple-minded. The kids at school teased me because I couldn't pass the exams. Mother told me not to pay any attention when kids called me retarded. But from the way she looked, I knew I was doing something wrong. Even though I'm fifty years old now, no matter how hard I try, I'm sometimes still a bother to people. Mostly I upset people I care about, like my friend Freddie and my wonderful wife Virginia.

The worst time I was a bother to my Mother and Dad happened when I was fifteen. We had this car and it was a Sunday and we went on a picnic. It started to rain, oh boy it was raining hard, so Mother and Dad got in the back seat to finish the sandwiches, and they were talking and not paying too much attention to me in the front seat. I thought it would be nice to let them enjoy the picnic and not bother them about driving home, so I started the engine by turning the key. Then I put the lever on the "D" and stepped on the gas, just like Dad always did. Dad yelled because someone had planted a tree too close to the side of the road and we had a bad accident. Mother and Dad got killed, and that tree hurt me pretty bad, too. I lost an eye and hurt my leg and my face got burned. I still have the scars.

After I got out of the hospital, I got a nice glass eye and went to a special school for a while. When I got out I went to live with Auntie. She's dead now, but she told me things like I shouldn't drive cars because it's dangerous and can get me into trouble. So I don't drive. I always take buses to work, except for when Virginia had a car and she

drove me to the company and back. She used to be real pretty.

You want to know how I met Virginia? I got a job in the office of Morris Industries. They make file cabinets, and I work as a file clerk. Everybody thinks that's pretty funny—file clerk in a file factory—so it must be. Virginia, she was doing some typing in the office when I got hired. She used to tell me she wasn't paid enough. I could tell right off she liked me, because she said I was the only idiot she could complain to without getting into trouble. Our supervisor doesn't like complaints.

I told Virginia I was sure glad *I* didn't need more money. In fact, I put most of it in the bank.

"Big deal, Harry," Virginia said to me. "You got three thousand saved, I bet."

"No," I told her. "I got one hundred and fifty thousand saved."

She laughed and said, "On *your* salary?" That's what she asked me, like she didn't believe me.

Well, you should have seen her face the next day when we were alone and I showed her the bankbooks. Of course, I told her how a lot of the money came from what Mother and Dad and Auntie left for me, but every two weeks I put even more money in. I took out house taxes and clothes and food money, and the rest went in the bank.

Well, oh boy, I could tell right away that Virginia liked me better than ever. Later that morning she asked me to go out on a date, and she explained what a date was. It was fun, I'll tell you.

The supervisor told me to stay away from Virginia because all Virginia wanted was money. I told Virginia that, and she explained that the supervisor was a crazy lady and I shouldn't tell her anything about our dates because she didn't have a man of her own and she would be jealous. Virginia asked me if I could keep our dates a secret.

Oh boy, was that fun, keeping it a secret. I didn't even tell the supervisor about Freddie, my best friend. He wasn't really my friend at first. He was Virginia's friend, but he liked me and he became my best friend. In fact, he was the only real friend I ever had, though I don't get to see him very much anymore. There is a fellow at work, Joe, and we have a cup of coffee once in a while, but he isn't a real friend. A real friend talks to you for more than five minutes. Freddie used to talk to me for more than fifteen minutes, telling me how lucky I was that a good-looking girl like Virginia was crazy about me.

Oh boy, I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have a girl like Virginia crazy about me and a friend like Freddie who said he would be my best man when Virginia asked me to marry her. We all drove to



Reno, and Virginia and me got married in this Courtship Chapel and it only cost thirty-five dollars, and then Virginia and Freddie and me drove back. We used Virginia's car, because since age fifteen I don't drive anymore.

Well, when we got back to town, Virginia moved into my house because it was bigger than her apartment. I'm glad we got married, but I don't see what the fuss is all about. The only difference between married and not married is you live in the same house and you spend a lot of time together. My friend Freddie spent a lot of time in our place with Virginia and me, and that was nice too. I miss Freddie almost as much as I miss Virginia.

My wife did two wonderful things for me. Every night she fixed me a drink of whiskey and sugar called an old-fashioned, and she gave it to me before I went to sleep. It sure tasted good.

The other wonderful thing Virginia did was to tell me how to be happy. "Do you ever feel discouraged, Harry?" she asked me, and I told her no. I could see she was real disappointed, so I said, "What do you mean?" She said that everyone gets discouraged, just like the day before, when I wanted to finish filing some reports but the janitor turned out the lights. I was mad and had to take the bus home, since Virginia had already left with her car. She could tell I was mad at the janitor, and she told me that's what being discouraged was.

"Oh, sure," I said, and I could see that I made her happy.

"Well, Harry," she said, "you want to learn how to stop being discouraged?"

I said, "Of course." I'm simple-minded, not stupid.

"You gotta write down what you're discouraged about, Harry," she told me, "and then it will go away and be all better." I said, "Good!" and she told me what to write down. *I miss Mother and Dad and Auntie and for 32 years all I do is work. I'm very tired and I don't want to go on. I'm sorry. Harry.* That's what I wrote on the piece of paper, and Virginia took it and put it in a drawer.

"Now you'll see, Harry," she said to me. "You won't be discouraged anymore."

Oh boy, that made me happy. I still remember the night I wrote that down, and I remember when Virginia brought me my old-fashioned later on. It tasted funny, but it was still good.

Well, I tell you, something must have been wrong with that drink, because the next thing I know I'm lying on a table in the funeral home and I don't have any clothes on. Can you believe it, they thought I was dead! I once saw on television where some man they thought was dead

sat up in this funeral home and scared everyone. It was the same with me, except I couldn't sit up. I tried, but it was like I was paralyzed. I couldn't sit up and I couldn't even help the man and lady dress me for my funeral in my black suit. But boy, when I think about it now, was I lucky! If I lived in a city instead of a small town they would have cut me up first to see what I died of, and then I really would have been in trouble, but the coroner said it was okay to bury me right away because my note proved it was suicide. Wasn't that dumb of him?

Anyway, it was a very nice funeral. Small but nice. Besides Virginia and Freddie and the minister, my supervisor was there, and I could hear her crying even if I couldn't see her. Joe was there, too, even though he isn't a real friend, and so was Auntie's lawyer. I heard the minister say that life's burdens were over for me and I would find eternal peace, and I heard Virginia say to the minister before the funeral even started how awful it was for her having a husband of only four months take poison. Wasn't that dumb of her? She didn't even know the difference between poison and funny-tasting whiskey.

Anyway, after the service, they put the coffin in a hearse and drove to the cemetery. Oh, boy, I sure am glad I told Auntie's lawyer that I wanted to be buried! When I got burned in the car so many years ago, I knew I didn't ever again want anything to do with fire, and the lawyer told that to Virginia when she wanted to have me cremated. He told her that my wishes were to be respected, that's what he said, and of course Virginia agreed.

Well, when I felt that dirt coming down on top of the coffin, I said to myself, "You've got yourself into a fine mess, Harry." I know now what was happening. I wasn't taking any breaths that you could see, not deep breaths or anything like that. It was like those religious men in India who put themselves into a trance and can stay buried for a long time. I even saw on television where some man could stay in a box in the bottom of a swimming pool. Well, that's what I was doing in that coffin.

I don't know about those religious men, but let me tell you, two hours after they buried me I began to feel very cramped, so I began to try to get out of the coffin. Oh boy, was I glad when I was finally able to move! And you can't say old Harry wasn't born under a lucky star. My funeral was late in the afternoon, so they didn't pack in as much dirt as usual. I guess they were going to finish the job in the morning. But I still had to work so hard that, right near the end, my glass eye fell out. I didn't waste any time looking for it underground, let me tell you. I'm simple-minded but I'm no fool.

When I finally got out, I was a mess. And would you believe it, as long as I've lived in our town, I still got mixed up. Instead of heading for the cemetery road, I stumbled toward the woods behind the cemetery. I was tired, too, let me tell you. So I slept a few hours, and when I woke up, oh boy, did I feel good! It was cold and dark and rainy and it was very windy, but I didn't mind. The air smelled so good. I knew how happy Virginia and Freddie would be to find out that I wasn't really dead, so I started out for the house. By this time I knew where I was, and it was only thirty minutes from where I live.

I just walked and walked, and pretty soon I was at the house. I was glad to be out of the rain, let me tell you. I got the key from under the stairs. That was another good thing Virginia taught me. I used to lose keys and then I couldn't get into the house, but she showed me where to hide an extra key. I knew I looked a mess with my black funeral suit soaked and my limp worse because of the rain and my empty eye socket all red, but what difference did that make? Virginia would still be happy. I walked up the stairs real quietly so the surprise would be better than ever.

I could hear Virginia and Freddie laughing in the bedroom, and I wondered why they were so happy. Maybe they had already found out I was alive. That would have spoiled my surprise. But they were laughing about something else, I guess. I slowly turned the doorknob to the bedroom, and they became real quiet. I don't know who they were expecting, but it wasn't me. When I opened the door wide and shouted, "I'm back!" they both screamed. It was a funny thing that on a cold and rainy night, they were both in bed without any clothes on. I guess they were holding onto each other because they missed me so much, but they ruined my surprise because they kept on screaming.

It's nice that my wife and my best friend are together now. Of course, they're not really together, because when I go to visit them, they're in separate wings of this place they call a sanitarium. They both have white hair—maybe they drank some of that funny-tasting whiskey, too—and Virginia isn't pretty anymore. Also they don't talk, which is kind of silly. I tell Virginia to write it down if she is discouraged and she will feel better, but she never listens to me.

I miss having Virginia at home, and I miss Freddie too, but you know what I miss most of all? Oh boy, will this surprise you! I miss those old-fashioneds. But I don't drink anymore. After what happened to me, I know you can't trust whiskey. It can go bad on you.

# The Voice in the Night

by William Hope Hodgson

*There was horror on the island—subtle,  
insidious, and, in the end, all-consuming.*

It was a dark, starless night. We were becalmed in the Northern Pacific. Our exact position I do not know; for the sun had been hidden during the course of a weary, breathless week, by a thin haze which had seemed to float above us, about the height of our mast-heads, at whiles descending and shrouding the surrounding sea.

With there being no wind, we had steadied the tiller, and I was the only man on deck. The crew, consisting of two men and a boy, were sleeping forrard in their den; while Will—my friend, and the master of our little craft—was aft in his bunk on the port side of the little cabin.

Suddenly, from out of the surrounding darkness, there came a hail:—

"Schooner, ahoy!"

"Hullo!" I sung out, having gathered my wits somewhat. "What are you? What do you want?"

"You need not be afraid," answered the queer voice, having probably noticed some trace of confusion in my tone. "I am only an old—man."

The pause sounded oddly; but it was only afterwards that it came back to me with any significance.

"Why don't you come alongside, then?" I queried somewhat snapshly; for I liked not his hinting at my having been a trifle shaken.

"I—I—can't. It wouldn't be safe. I—" The voice broke off, and there was silence.

"What do you mean?" I asked growing more and more astonished. "Why not safe? Where are you?"

I listened for a moment; but there came no answer. And then, a sudden indefinite suspicion, of I knew not what, coming to me, I stepped swiftly to the binnacle, and took out the lighted lamp. At the same time, I knocked on the deck with my heel to waken Will. Then I was back at the side, throwing the yellow funnel of light out into the silent immensity beyond our rail. As I did so, I heard a slight, muffled cry, and then the sound of a splash, as though some one had dipped oars abruptly. Yet I cannot say that I saw anything with certainty; save, it seemed to me, that with the first flash of the light, there had been something upon the water, where now there was nothing.

"Hullo, there!" I called. "What foolery is this!"

But there came only the indistinct sounds of a boat being pulled away into the night.

Then I heard Will's voice, from the direction of the after scuttle:—

"What's up, George?"

"Come here Will!" I said.

"What is it?" he asked, coming across the deck.

I told him the queer thing which had happened. He put several questions; then after a moment's silence, he raised his hands to his lips, and hailed:—

"Boat, ahoy!"

From a long distance away, there came back to us a faint reply, and my companion repeated his call. Presently, after a short period of silence, there grew on our hearing the muffled sound of oars; at which Will hailed again.

This time there was a reply:—

"Put away the light."

"I'm damned if I will," I muttered; but Will told me to do as the voice bade, and I shoved it down under the bulwarks.

"Come nearer," he said, and the oar-strokes continued. Then, when apparently some half-dozen fathoms distant, they again ceased.

"Come alongside," exclaimed Will. "There's nothing to be frightened of aboard here!"

"Promise that you will not show the light?"

"What's to do with you," I burst out, "that you're so infernally afraid of the light?"

"Because—" began the voice, and stopped short.

"Because what?" I asked, quickly.



Will put his hand on my shoulder.

"Shut up a minute, old man," he said, in a low voice. "Let me tackle him."

He leant more over the rail.

"See here, Mister," he said, "this is a pretty queer business, you coming upon us like this, right out in the middle of the blessed Pacific. How are we to know what sort of a hanky-panky trick you're up to? You say there's only one of you. How are we to know, unless we get a squint of you—eh? What's your objection to the light, anyway?"

As he finished, I heard the noise of the oars again, and then the voice came; but now from a greater distance, and sounding extremely hopeless and pathetic.

"I am sorry—sorry! I would not have troubled you, only I am hungry, and—so is she."

The voice died away, and the sound of the oars, dipping irregularly, was borne to us.

"Stop!" sung out Will. "I don't want to drive you away. Come back! We'll keep the light hidden, if you don't like it."

He turned to me:—

"It's a damned queer rig, this; but I think there's nothing to be afraid of?"

There was a question in his tone, and I replied.

"No, I think the poor devil's been wrecked around here, and gone crazy."

The sound of the oars drew nearer.

"Shove that lamp back in the binnacle," said Will; then he leaned over the rail, and listened. I replaced the lamp, and came back to his side. The dipping of the oars ceased some dozen yards distant.

"Won't you come alongside now?" asked Will in an even voice. "I have had the lamp put back in the binnacle."

"I—I cannot," replied the voice. "I dare not come nearer. I dare not even pay you for the—the provisions."

"That's all right," said Will, and hesitated. "You're welcome to as much grub as you can take—" Again he hesitated.

"You are very good," exclaimed the voice. "May God, who understands everything, reward you—" It broke off huskily.

"The—the lady?" said Will, abruptly. "Is she—"

"I have left her behind upon the island," came the voice.

"What island?" I cut in.

"I know not its name," returned the voice. "I would to God—" it

began, and checked itself as suddenly.

"Could we not send a boat for her?" asked Will at this point.

"No!" said the voice, with extraordinary emphasis. "My God! No!" There was a moment's pause; then it added, in a tone which seemed a merited reproach:—

"It was because of our want I ventured—Because her agony tortured me."

"I am a forgetful brute," exclaimed Will. "Just a minute, whoever you are, and I will bring you up something at once."

In a couple of minutes he was back again, and his arms were full of various edibles. He paused at the rail.

"Can't you come alongside for them?" he asked.

"No—I *dare not*," replied the voice, and it seemed to me that in its tones I detected a note of stifled craving—as though the owner hushed a mortal desire. It came to me then in a flash, that the poor old creature out there in the darkness, was *suffering* for actual need of that which Will held in his arms; and yet, because of some unintelligible dread, refraining from dashing to the side of our little schooner, and receiving it. And with the lightning-like conviction, there came the knowledge that the Invisible was not mad; but sanely facing some intolerable horror.

"Damn it, Will!" I said, full of many feelings, over which predominated a vast sympathy. "Get a box. We must float off the stuff to him in it."

This we did—propelling it away from the vessel, out into the darkness, by means of a boathook. In a minute, a slight cry from the Invisible came to us, and we knew that he had secured the box.

A little later, he called out a farewell to us, and so heartfelt a blessing that I am sure we were the better for it. Then, without more ado, we heard the ply of oars across the darkness.

"Pretty soon off," remarked Will, with perhaps just a little sense of injury.

"Wait," I replied. "I think somehow he'll come back. He must have been badly needing that food."

"And the lady," said Will. For a moment he was silent; then he continued:—

"It's the queerest thing ever I've tumbled across, since I've been fishing."

"Yes," I said, and fell to pondering.

And so the time slipped away—an hour, another, and still Will stayed with me; for the queer adventure had knocked all desire for

sleep out of him.

The third hour was three parts through, when we heard again the sound of oars across the silent ocean.

"Listen!" said Will, a low note of excitement in his voice.

"He's coming, just as I thought," I muttered.

**T**he dipping of the oars grew nearer, and I noted that the strokes were firmer and longer. The food had been needed.

The came to a stop a little distance off the broadside, and the queer voice came again to us through the darkness:—

"Schooner, ahoy!"

"That you?" asked Will.

"Yes," replied the voice, "I left you suddenly; but—but there was great need.

"The—lady is grateful now on earth. She will be more grateful soon in—in heaven."

Will began to make some reply, in a puzzled voice; but became confused, and broke off short. I said nothing. I was wondering at the curious pauses, and, apart from my wonder, I was full of a great sympathy.

The voice continued:—

"We—she and I, have talked, as we shared the result of God's tenderness and yours—"

Will interposed; but without coherence.

"I beg of you not to—to belittle your deed of Christian charity this night," said the voice. "Be sure that it has not escaped His notice."

It stopped, and there was a full minute's silence. Then it came again:—

"We have spoken together upon that which—which has befallen us. We had thought to go out, without telling any, of the terror which has come into our—lives. She is with me in believing that tonight's happenings are under a special ruling, and that it is God's wish that we should tell you all that we have suffered since—since—"

"Yes?" said Will, softly.

"Since the sinking of the *Albatross*."

"Ah!" I exclaimed, involuntarily. "She left Newcastle for Frisco some six months ago, and hasn't been heard of since."

"Yes," answered the voice. "But some few degrees to the North of the line she was caught in a terrible storm, and dismayed. When the day came, it was found that she was leaking badly, and, presently, it falling to a calm, the sailors took to the boats, leaving—leaving a

young lady—my fiancée—and myself upon the wreck.

"We were below, gathering together a few of our belongings, when they left. They were entirely callous, through fear, and when we came up on the decks, we saw them only as small shapes afar off upon the horizon. Yet we did not despair, but set to work and constructed a small raft. Upon this we put such few matters as it would hold, including a quantity of water and some ship's biscuit. Then, the vessel being very deep in the water, we got ourselves onto the raft, and pushed off.

"It was later, when I observed that we seemed to be in the way of some tide or current, which bore us from the ship at an angle; so that in the course of three hours, by my watch, her hull became invisible to our sight, her broken masts remaining in view for a somewhat longer period. Then, towards evening, it grew misty, and so through the night. The next day we were still encompassed by the mist, the weather remaining quiet.

"For four days, we drifted through this strange haze, until, on the evening of the fourth day, there grew upon our ears the murmur of breakers at a distance. Gradually it became plainer, and, somewhat after midnight, it appeared to sound upon either hand at no very great space. The raft was raised upon a swell several times, and then we were in smooth water, and the noise of the breakers was before.

"When the morning came, we found that we were in a sort of great lagoon; but of this we noticed little at the time; for close before us, through the enshrouding mist, loomed the hull of a large sailing vessel. With one accord, we fell upon our knees and thanked God; for we thought that here was an end to our perils. We had much to learn.

"The raft drew near the ship, and we shouted on them, to take us aboard; but none answered. Presently, the raft touched against the side of the vessel, and, seeing a rope hanging downwards, I seized it and began to climb. Yet I had much ado to make my way up, because of a kind of grey, lichenous fungus, which had seized upon the rope, and which blotched the side of the ship, lividly.

"I reached the rail, and clambered over it, on to the deck. Here, I saw that the decks were covered, in great patches, with the grey masses, some of them rising into nodules several feet in height; but at the time, I thought less of this matter than of the possibility of there being people aboard the ship. I shouted; but none answered. Then I went to the door below the poop deck. I opened it, and peered in. There was a great smell of staleness, so that I knew in a moment that nothing living was within, and with the knowledge, I shut the door

quickly; for I felt suddenly lonely.

"I went back to the side, where I had scrambled up. My—my sweetheart was still sitting quietly upon the raft. Seeing me look down, she called up to know whether there were any aboard of the ship. I replied that the vessel had the appearance of having been long deserted; but that if she would wait a little, I would see whether there was anything in the shape of a ladder, by which she could ascend to the deck. Then we would make a search through the vessel together. A little later, on the opposite side of the decks, I found a rope side-ladder. This I carried across, and a minute afterwards, she was beside me.

"Together, we explored the cabins and apartments in the after-part of the ship; but nowhere was there any sign of life. Here and there, within the cabins themselves, we came across odd patches of that queer fungus; but this, as my sweetheart said, could be cleansed away.

"In the end, having assured ourselves that the after portion of the vessel was empty, we picked our ways to the bows, between the ugly grey nodules of that strange growth; and here we made a further search, which told us that there was indeed none aboard but ourselves.

"This being now beyond any doubt, we returned to the stern of the ship, and proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Together, we cleared out and cleaned two of the cabins; and, after that, I made examination whether there was anything eatable in the ship. This I soon found was so, and thanked God in my heart for His goodness. In addition to this, I discovered the whereabouts of the freshwater pump, and having fixed it, I found the water drinkable, though somewhat unpleasant to the taste.

"For several days, we stayed aboard the ship, without attempting to get to the shore. We were busily engaged in making the place habitable. Yet even thus early, we became aware that our lot was even less to be desired than might have been imagined; for though, as a first step, we scraped away the odd patches of growth that studded the floors and walls of the cabins and saloon, yet they returned to almost their original size within the space of twenty-four hours, which not only discouraged us, but gave us a feeling of vague unease.

"Still, we would not admit ourselves beaten, so set to work afresh, and not only scraped away the fungus, but soaked the places where it had been with carbolic, a can-full of which I had found in the pantry. Yet, by the end of the week, the growth had returned in full strength, and, in addition, it had spread to other places, as though our

touching it had allowed germs from it to travel elsewhere.

"On the seventh morning, my sweetheart woke to find a small patch of it growing on her pillow, close to her face. At that, she came to me, so soon as she could get her garments upon her. I was in the galley at the time, lighting the fire for breakfast.

"Come here, John," she said, and led me aft. When I saw the thing upon her pillow, I shuddered, and then and there we agreed to go right out of the ship, and see whether we could not fare to make ourselves more comfortable ashore.

"Hurriedly, we gathered together our few belongings, and even among these, I found that the fungus had been at work; for one of her shawls had a little lump of it growing near one edge. I threw the whole thing over the side, without saying anything to her.

"The raft was still alongside; but it was too clumsy to guide, and I lowered down a small boat that hung across the stern, and in this we made our way to the shore. Yet, as we drew near it, I became gradually aware that here the vile fungus, which had driven us from the ship, was growing riot. In places it rose into horrible, fantastic mounds, which seemed almost to quiver, as with a quiet life, when the wind blew across them. Here and there, it took on the forms of vast fingers, and in others it just spread out flat and smooth and treacherous. Odd places, it appeared as grotesque stunted trees, seeming extraordinarily kinked and gnarled—the whole quaking vilely at times.

"At first, it seemed to us that there was no single portion of the surrounding shore which was not hidden beneath the masses of the hideous lichen; yet, in this, I found we were mistaken; for somewhat later, coasting along the shore at a little distance, we described a smooth white patch of what appeared to be fine sand, and there we landed. It was not sand. What it was, I do not know. All that I have observed, is that upon it, the fungus will not grow; while everywhere else, save where the sand-like earth wanders oddly, path-wise, amid the grey desolation of the lichen, there is nothing but that loathsome greyness.

"It is difficult to make you understand how cheered we were to find one place that was absolutely free from the growth, and here we deposited our belongings. Then we went back to the ship for such things as it seemed to us we should need. Among other matters, I managed to bring ashore with me one of the ship's sails, with which I constructed two small tents, which, though exceedingly roughshaped, served the purposes for which they were intended. In these, we lived

and stored our various necessities, and thus for a matter of some four weeks, all went smoothly and without particular unhappiness. Indeed, I may say with much of happiness—for—for we were together.

It was on the thumb of her right hand, that the growth first showed. It was only a small circular spot, much like a little grey mole. My God! How the fear leapt to my heart when she showed me the place. We cleansed it, between us, washing it with carbolic and water. In the morning of the following day, she showed her hand to me again. The grey warty thing had returned. For a little while, we looked at one another in silence. Then, still wordless, we started again to remove it. In the midst of the operation, she spoke suddenly.

"What's that on the side of your face, Dear?' Her voice was sharp with anxiety. I put my hand up to feel.

"There! Under the hair by your ear.—A little to the front a bit.' My finger rested upon the place, and then I knew.

"Let us get your thumb done first,' I said. And she submitted, only because she was afraid to touch me until it was cleansed. I finished washing and disinfecting her thumb, and then she turned to my face. After it was finished, we sat together and talked awhile of many things; for there had come into our lives sudden, very terrible thoughts. We were, all at once, afraid of something worse than death. We spoke of loading the boat with provisions and water, and making our way out on to the sea; yet we were helpless, for many causes, and—and the growth had attacked us already. We decided to stay. God would do with us what was His will. We would wait.

"A month, two months, three months passed, and the places grew somewhat, and there had come others. Yet we fought so strenuously with the fear, that its headway was but slow, comparatively speaking.

"Occasionally, we ventured off to the ship for such stores as we needed. There, we found that the fungus grew persistently. One of the nodules on the maindeck became soon as high as my head.

"We had now given up all thought or hope of leaving the island. We realized that it would be unallowable to go among healthy humans, with the thing from which we were suffering.

"With this determination and knowledge in our minds, we knew that we should have to husband our food and water; for we did not know, at that time, but that we should possibly live for many years.

"This reminds me that I have told you that I am an old man. Judged by years this is not so. But—but—"

He broke off; then continued somewhat abruptly:—

"As I was saying, we knew that we should have to use care in the matter of food. But we had no idea then how little food there was left, of which to take care. It was a week later, that I made the discovery that all the other bread tanks—which I had supposed full—were empty, and that (beyond odd tins of vegetables and meat, and some other matters) we had nothing on which to depend, but the bread in the tank which I had already opened.

"After learning this, I bestirred myself to do what I could, and set to work at fishing in the lagoon; but with no success. At this, I was somewhat inclined to feel desperate, until the thought came to me to try outside the lagoon, in the open sea.

"Here, at times, I caught odd fish; but so infrequently, that they proved of but little help in keeping us from the hunger which threatened. I seemed to me that our deaths were likely to come by hunger, and by the growth of the thing which had seized upon our bodies.

"We were in this state of mind when the fourth month wore out. Then I made a very horrible discovery. One morning, a little before midday, I came off from the ship, with a portion of the biscuits which were left. In the mouth of her tent, I saw my sweetheart sitting, eating something.

"What is it, my Dear? I called out as I leapt ashore. Yet, on hearing my voice, she seemed confused, and, turning, slyly threw something towards the edge of the little clearing. It fell short, and, a vague suspicion having arisen within me, I walked across and picked it up. It was a piece of the grey fungus.

"As I went to her, with it in my hand, she turned deadly pale; then a rose red.

"I felt strangely dazed and frightened.

"My Dear! My Dear! I said, and could say no more. Yet, at my words, she broke down and cried bitterly. Gradually, as she calmed, I got from her the news that she had tried it the preceding day, and—and liked it. I got her to promise on her knees not to touch it again, however great our hunger. After she had promised, she told me that the desire for it had come suddenly, and that, until the moment of desire, she had experienced nothing towards it, but the most extreme repulsion.

"Later in the day, feeling strangely restless, and much shaken with the thing which I had discovered, I made my way along one of the twisted paths—formed by the white, sand-like substance—which led among the fungoid growth. I had, once before, ventured along there; but not to any great distance. This time, being involved in perplexing



thought, I went much further than hitherto.

Suddenly, I was called to myself, by a queer hoarse sound on my left. Turning quickly, I saw that there was movement among an extraordinarily shaped mass of fungus, close to my elbow. It was swaying uneasily, as though it possessed life of its own. Abruptly, as I stared, the thought came to me that the thing had a grotesque resemblance to the figure of a distorted human creature. Even as the fancy flashed into my brain, there was a slight sickening noise of tearing, and I saw that one of the branch-like arms was detaching itself from the surrounding grey masses and coming towards me. The head of the thing—a shapeless grey ball, inclined in my direction. I stood stupidly, and the vile arm brushed across my face. I gave out a frightened cry, and ran back a few paces. There was a sweetish taste upon my lips, where the thing had touched me. I licked them, and was immediately filled with an inhuman desire. I turned and seized a mass of the fungus. Then more, and—more. I was insatiable. In the midst of the devouring, the remembrance of the morning's discovery swept into my mazed brain. It was sent by God. I dashed the fragment I held, to the ground. Then, utterly wretched and feeling a dreadful guiltiness, I made my way back to the little encampment.

"I think she knew, by some marvelous intuition which love must have given, so soon as she set eyes on me. Her quiet sympathy made it easier for me, and I told her of my sudden weakness; yet omitted to mention the extraordinary thing which had gone before. I desired to spare her all unnecessary terror.

"But, for myself, I had added an intolerable knowledge, to breed an incessant terror in my brain; for I doubted not but that I had seen the end of one of those men who had come to the island in the ship in the lagoon; and in that monstrous ending, I had seen our own.

"Thereafter, we kept from the abominable food, though the desire for it had entered into our blood. Yet, our dread punishment was upon us; for, day by day, with monstrous rapidity, the fungoid growth took hold of our poor bodies. Nothing we could do would check it materially, and so—and so—we who had been human, became—Well, it matters less each day. Only—only we had been man and maid!

"And day by day, the fight is more dreadful, to withstand the hunger-lust for the terrible lichen.

"A week ago we ate the last of the biscuit, and since that time I have caught three fish. I was out here fishing tonight, when your schooner drifted upon me out of the mist. I hailed you. You know the rest, and may God, out of His great heart, bless you for your

goodness to a—a couple of poor outcast souls."

There was the dip of an oar—another. Then the voice came again, and for the last time, sounding through the slight surrounding mist, ghostly and mournful.

"God bless you! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," we shouted together, hoarsely, our hearts full of many emotions.

I glanced about me. I became aware that the dawn was upon us.

The sun flung a stray beam across the hidden sea; pierced the mist dully, and lit up the receding boat with a gloomy fire. Indistinctly, I saw something nodding between the oars. I thought of a sponge—a great, grey nodding sponge—The oars continued to ply. They were grey—as was the boat—and my eyes searched a moment vainly for the conjunction of hand and oar. My gaze flashed back to the—head. It nodded forward as the oars went backward for the stroke. Then the oars were dipped, the boat shot out of the patch of light, and the—the thing went nodding into the mist.

# Go to Sleep

## by John Skipp

*He was loving and compassionate.  
There was kindness in his heart.  
And he brought a gift called Death.*

Four twenty-seven in the morning. Streets naked and shimmering under a twilit patina of frost. Huddled against the grey wall, the goat man is sleeping. Rick is watching, weighing. And nobody else is there.

Rick can't stop looking at the goat man's feet. Something nasty has spawned down there . . . some black, bloating, hideous decay gone well beyond all hope of repair. They're the kind of feet that some well-meaning doctor would like to amputate, in fact, because whatever slow death has taken hold of his extremities will eat its way into his bowels. The massive body will blacken and shrivel, and the eyes will bug out, and one last inarticulate goatlike bray will rasp out against the night in agony.

*And, of course, nobody will be there,* Rick muses, scanning the length of Thirty-Fourth Street for some sign of life. Over Herald Square, two sheets of old newspaper do a ghostly mating dance in the wind; the fate of one derelict couldn't interest them less. And the statues are there, as always. Eternally vigilant, with their spears and armor. Eternally looking the other way.

There are pigeons, too, in more or less the same boat as the goat man. Sick. Homeless. Slowly dying. Rick watches them hobble around for a minute, flapping their wings abortively and pecking at the dirt for sustenance. *Just be glad you don't drink,* he advises them silently. Then he drags on his cigarette and looks back at the goat man's naked, horrible feet.

The goat man sleeps, huddled against the grey wall at the mouth of the subway stairs. It would have been warmer for him down there,

but apparently he just couldn't make it. An empty bottle of something pokes its mouth out from under his jacket, and a thin pool of whatever is freezing on the sidewalk before him. He snores, a sound resplendent with burbling phlegm. Rick sighs wearily, then crouches down in front of him.

*That leaves me, am I right?* A rhetorical question. The goat man doesn't answer. *Just you and me, buddy.* Rick confirms it with a nod of his head. The goat man snores, oblivious.

His hands are shaking a little; he'd like to believe that it's just the cold. The cigarette almost slips from between his tingling fingers as he brings it up for one last drag. It tastes like shit. He snubs the butt into a crack in the sidewalk, sticks it in his back pocket when he's sure it's dead, and returns to the task at hand.

Not so long ago, the night would have found Rick locked in a parlor liberal's paralysis, debating the morality, letting right and wrong slug it out while the dangerous seconds ticked past. But the last several months have hardened him, filled him with chilly resolve. Right or wrong, he will do it. Now. Before anyone comes or the goat man wakes.

Like all the times before.

Quickly, Rick rubs his freezing hands together, wipes a thin trail of mucus onto the sleeve of his winter jacket. Then he reaches over—slowly, slowly—to rest his hands on the matted grey Afro of the goat man's head.

He listens, first, as he always has, for any sign of hope. He's not surprised to find nothing there: nothing worth saving. Just the muttering voices. Rick has known, from the first time he saw him bellowing on a street corner, bellowing at nobody, that the goat man is simply taking too long to die.

Pictures of the twitching dog come creeping back into Rick's mind. He pushes them away, grimacing. The goat man jerks a little in his sleep, as though he, too, has seen them. Then he stops.

Rick closes his eyes, summoning up the power. He focuses, sending it out through his fingertips. And he whispers three words into the goat man's being.

"Go to sleep," he whispers, gently. "Go to sleep."

It only takes a moment. Rick pulls his hands away, straightens, and turns. In the back of his mind, he hears the car barreling down Broadway in his direction. He walks up Sixth Avenue, not looking back. The statues stand watch, seeing nothing.

The shitty taste is still in his mouth; but Rick has resigned himself

to that much, at least.

It will be hours before anyone notices that the goat man's tortured breathing has stopped.

*In his dream, he sees the twitching dog again, whining in its pool of mud and gore. He feels the wild thumping of its tiny heart, the wet rattle in its lungs, as surely as he feels the rain that spatters on his head. Behind him, Daddy is digging around in the trunk for something. Ricky, age seven, follows the skid marks on the highway to the side of the road where their car is stopped. Daddy pulls out something long and shiny.*

*And for the millionth time, he watches his father's grim approach. The cold, set features. The tire iron. For the millionth time, he sees the shadow loom enormous, Daddy towering like God over dog and boy. He hears the voice like thunder, telling him to stand aside. He feels himself obey.*

*And he watches the cold steel come down in a shimmering arc, whistling through the wind and the rain. He watches the fur-covered skull split in two, the redmeat streams of horror launching off in every direction. The scream spirals up and up, crazily, as it has a million times before; and in the last moment before he turns away, opening wide to part with his fried clams and HoJo Cola, he notes that his father's hand is coated to the wrist in glistening darkness.*

*"It's all right," he hears his father say. "I couldn't just leave him like that, Ricky, you know? He was suffering." The massive hands reach down, grabbing him by the shoulders, and the sickly sweet smell of death assails him from his right, soaking into his t-shirt and haunting him forever. "I had to put him out of his misery," Daddy says from far away, and he feels himself starting to drift . . .*

**I**t was shortly after his ninth birthday that Richard Hale discovered his power. Their tomcat, Tom, had ripped a sparrow to pieces and left it bleeding in the backyard. He had shushed Tom away and picked the poor thing up, sensing instantly that death was sliding in like a dagger. The dog's death was still vivid, even after a year and a half; and when he heard Daddy's booming laughter from the living room, a tiny voice that he recognized as his own said *not this time. Not like that.*

He had put the bird to sleep, effortlessly, with that simple incantation. It had staggered him so much that he'd thrown the sparrow into the woods behind his house, hardly breathing, and had gone off

by himself for an hour. Daddy'd paddled his ass something fierce when he got home, but he wouldn't say a word about what happened.

He never told anyone.

Through junior and senior high school, he was one of the quiet guys that nobody knew. He got in with the partying crowd, to be sure; but he was the guy zoning out by the stereo while others played guitars and cracked jokes, punched each other out or pawed each other in the corners. He was the one who, when conversations turned to Ouija boards and UFOs, reincarnation and dope-spawned Cozmic Concepts, looked away with a face that spoke silently of pain.

Graduation found him heading for New York University, where he would study medicine. Summer in the Village was an amazing experience, frightening and exhilarating all at once: he'd had no idea that humanity could rise so high or sink so low. He was staggered by the proximity to famous people, famous places, and the thousands more who aspired to that glittering stratum.

And then there were the bums.

Shuffling, shambling, dragging the wreckage of their lives behind them in grocery bags, staring vacant-eyed at invisible things while their voices told the same stories, over and over and over. Even in the sunlight, in comfortable weather, they sent chills down his spine. There were so many of them. Their presence was something that refused to leave him alone. Sometimes his fingertips would tingle just a bit. He tried not to think about it.

He got a job as an orderly at NYU Medical Center. Classes began, and he threw himself into them. He made friends. He went to parties. He sampled the fruits of romance and rejection. And in weaving his way between the brilliance and the ruin, Rick felt something coming together inside of him. Not quite there yet. But coming. And soon.

He never told anyone.

And he never used the power.

But when the broken bodies of accident victims and the criminally assaulted were wheeled past him in the hospital corridors, he would find himself praying for an opportunity to act. And when the news would come of somebody dying quietly in their sleep, he would experience a strange kind of jubilation: a thrill in the knowledge that cruel fate had been cheated of its option for imposing and sustaining misery.

Then his first New York City winter had come; and with it, the discovery of his purpose.



*Like a dream. Like a dream. Turning the corner, a little tipsy, staggering slightly in the cold night wind . . . and almost tripping over the old woman on the sidewalk. Stopping, frozen, and staring at her: the flesh like chalk under a pale blue light, thin as tissue paper, barely covering her bones; the thin, tattered jacket, barely covering her flesh. And feeling the tingle spread across his fingertips.*

*It took forty-five minutes to get up the nerve, and almost two weeks to get over.*

*But it only took a moment to do.*

*She was the first.*

*There were more, then. There were always more. Rick found that it became easier as he went along. The pain and guilt faded, giving way to a sense of . . . what? Call it duty. Call it purpose. Call it chilly resolve. It was something that he could do. The only thing, when you got right down to it.*

*And nobody else was there. Nor did it appear that they ever would be.*

*So he took them out, one after the other. He cut them loose from their misery, his misery, the whole miserable world's pain. He said goodbye to the forgotten grandmothers, the abandoned children, the former friends and lovers. He hushed the tortured voices of memory: their only remaining dreams. He tucked them in with a touch and a whisper, sent them gently off into that good night.*

*How many? No less than forty, he was quite sure . . . although, in truth, he'd lost count somewhere in the middle of January. It was hard to say. There were so many of them.*

*And there were always, always more.*

"Gimme some coffee." They are in the waiting room at Penn Station, waiting for the Boston express to take his friend Joe home for the weekend, when the bum's rasping voice first accosts them. Joe brushes him off like a seasoned New Yorker; but Rick stops, staring into that face.

"Gimme some coffee," the bum says again, and his eyes are so blank that Rick shudders involuntarily. Filth covers him like a second skin, and the grotesque parody of a clever smile creases both layers on its way to Rick's sight. He has the face of a mongoloid, without the excuse of having been born one. He is a shambling, vomitous wreck.

Rick pauses for a moment, tightening inside, before draining half of his coffee and handing it over without a word. He can feel Joe bristling with anger behind him, but he doesn't care. *Let him drink, the*



small voice inside admonishes. *The last supper of the condemned man.*

The bum doesn't thank him. He takes a swig and spits it quickly onto the floor. Then, as if nothing at all had happened, he looks back up at Rick and says, "Gimme a cigarette."

"Wait a minute, pal," Joe says, coming up beside his friend. "He gave you some coffee, and you spit it all over the fucking floor. Get a cigarette offa somebody else, all right?"

"Joe!" Rick is as surprised by his own outburst as he is by Joe's steely words.

"Gimme a cigarette," the bum repeats, now adamant.

"Fuck you! Get your *own* cigarettes, goddammit!" Joe's nostrils are flaring, his face turning red. Rick grabs him by the arm and starts to drag him away, but not before Joe can add, "You're the scum of the earth!" at the top of his lungs.

The bum starts laughing, then: a dry, utterly humorless sound. The laugh of a man who has turned his back on everything, who no longer cares at all. It cuts through the air like hot shrapnel, forcing startled heads to turn. One of them belongs to a woman seated directly behind the bum. He turns to her and speaks, as though the laughter had never happened. He tells her to give him a cigarette.

"What's the matter with you?" Rick demands, pushing Joe into the seat beside him, down the aisle from the bum.

"It just gives me the shits, man," Joe mumbles, fists clenched in his lap. "I mean, we bust our balls for every penny we get, and we're paying out the ass for our lousy degrees, and here *this* joker just sticks his greasy paw out and says *gimme gimme gimme*, and we're supposed to hand the world to him on a silver platter so he can piss all over it. Makes me sick, that's all." He shakes his head furiously. "Makes me sick to my goddamn stomach."

"You could have a little more compassion," Rick says, but the words sound suddenly hollow.

"Shit. You give it to him, he spits it out. He has no shame. He doesn't care. Man, he forfeited his right to my respect when that coffee hit the ground. I'd sooner respect a dog turd. I mean, *look* at him!"

Rick looks. The bum has a cigarette now, probably culled from the poor woman behind him. He has taken maybe three or four drags off of it. Now he tosses it to the floor and stomps it with his bare foot.

*His bare foot . . .*

Five pairs of socks are strewn around the floor, along with what passes for a pair of shoes. The bum's pants are ripped up to the knees,

and his legs are red and swollen. For the first time, Rick notices half a buttered bagel on the bum's lap; with horror he sees that several pieces are also on the floor, buttered side down.

The bum takes a bite and chews it slowly. Then he rips a chunk, equal in size, from the bagel and tosses it. When it hits the dirt, Rick feels it like a slug to the stomach.

"See what I mean?" Joe says, and Rick is unable to argue with him. "This guy is the lowest of the low. I can't believe that nobody's gotten around to *killing him yet.*"

Rick's whole body shakes at the comment. He cannot bring himself to meet Joe's gaze.

"I mean, doesn't that make you want to punch that guy's *lights* out? Doesn't it make you *wanna* just grab him and shake him and say, 'Hey, asshole! Wise the fuck up!'"

"No." Rick states it with conviction. "No, I wouldn't say that."

But when the hardass cop comes strutting over and tells the bum to get out . . . when the bum stoops to pick up his filthy socks and shoes, leaving the area strewn with spilled coffee and bits of bagel . . . when the bum disappears, laughing his soulless, inhuman mockery of laughter, Rick looks at him and silently says, *You're next, baby. You're next.*

*That night . . . this night . . . the dream comes swiftly. He is kneeling over the dog, and his father is coming: a deadly leviathan, gaining unholy mass with every step, the tire iron glimmering cold as a thousand New York winters, obscenely huge in the grip of his clean right hand. As the shadow falls over them, little Ricky hears a voice that he recognizes as his own say, Not this time. Not like that.*

*Daddy tells him to stand aside, but the voice is strangely impotent: the thunder, the authority, is gone. Rick hesitates only a moment, pulled by the past and its endless repetitions. Then he moves. Shielding the dog's body with his own, reaching down to take its head in its hands.*

*To end its suffering, bloodlessly.*

*To put it to sleep.*

*Now, he whispers, and closes his eyes.*

*That's when the dog whirls suddenly, lunging with its sharp-fanged death's-head grin, and rips his hand off at the wrist.*

**F**our twenty-seven in the morning, again. Manhattan, asleep under a thin, shabby blanket of snow. Behind the glass doors,

three of them are sleeping in the entrance to Grand Central's subway station. Rick watches and weighs, leaving round blobs of mist on the glass with his breath. And nobody else is there.

The dream will not leave him alone. It claws at the back of his head like a rat behind a wall, trying to break through. He tries to ignore it.

But he can't.

*But here I am, aren't I? Smiling sadly. Doing it anyway. I must be crazy.* Rick takes another drag off his cigarette, a creature of two minds, watching over the broken men. Under the heavy winter coat, he is sweating; and the violent shaking of his hands has very little to do with the cold.

Rick lets the cigarette slip from between his fingers unfinished; he grinds it into the snow with his boot. No time for amenities. If he's going to act, it has got to be now: before anyone comes, or his fear overwhelms him, or the bums in the foyer awake.

*God, I'm scared,* he thinks. *I must be outta my goddamn mind.* Then he opens the door, almost independent of thought, and steps quietly inside.

Softly, slowly, Rick moves toward the far wall, where the men lay sprawled out in filthy, tattered heaps. The air is thick with spilled liquor and piss, ripening in the heat from the tunnels below. It turns his stomach, and he almost stops. But not quite.

For as he draws nearer, and the foyer widens to meet the top of the stairs, Rick realizes that the man in the center is the very one he'd been looking for. The realization jolts him, while the rat behind the wall in the back of his head claws away with renewed vigor.

*Shut up,* he tells himself, fighting for inner control. The entrance-way seems suddenly brighter, the bums starker in relief against the bareness of the wall. He lingers, trembling, while his eyes take in every detail of the three figures before him.

The one on the left is small, slight, almost completely hairless. His skin is incredibly smooth and thin. There is an embryonic quality about him; curled up on the floor with his beak nose and bulging eyes, he reminds Rick of a chicken fetus floating inside an egg.

The one on the right is much larger, with thick greying hair and a massive beard surrounding his strong, finely chiseled features. Years of darkness have eroded his face, like a statue left standing through a thousand acid rains; but there is still something commanding about him, an air of regality lost.

And then there is the man in the center: the bagel-strewer, the

spitter of coffee, with his blank eyes and horrible laughter. Sleep has not softened the apelike features or brought to light any hidden attributes that might have redeemed him. He is still ugly as a slug; and the wet trail behind him suggests an aptness to the comparison that makes Rick shudder.

He catches himself in the midst of a deep, miserable sigh and realizes that he has been standing there for the last three minutes or more. *Come on*, he urges to himself. *Get it over with or get the hell out of here. One or the other, man. Now.*

But there is no question as to which it will be. After only a moment's hesitation, he advances once again toward them.

The man on the left is closest. Rick goes to him first. His naked scalp is baby-soft and clammy as Rick touches him with fingertips that feel drained of all circulation.

And listens. Like all the times before.

It only takes a moment.

Then Rick is on his feet again, moving like a man in a dream toward the center figure. Kneeling there with his hands outstretched. Touching. Hearing. Saying the words. And rising again, amazed by how little he feels, how simple and quick and *nothing* it was in the end.

Now there is only the man on the right: the fallen king, slumped with his back against the wall like a monarch dozing on his throne. Rick stares at him for a moment, hesitating. *What is it?* he asks himself, but his mind offers up no useful explanations.

Only the continuous scraping of the rat.

*Shut up*, he angrily commands. *Come on. This is stupid.* But there is a tentativeness in his step that he has never known before as he moves to the head of the subway stairs and kneels before the broken man . . .

*. . . who reaches up suddenly with one gnarled, greying talon and grabs Rick firmly by the wrist.*

Rick screams.

"You're the one, ain'tcha?" The voice is sibilant, horrible. The rheumy eyes are a baleful red. They are judge's eyes. They latch onto Rick's and hold them helplessly, as a hideous grin crackles across his lips and begins to bleed.

"I been waitin' for you," the man says, leaning forward until his face is mere inches from Rick's. "I knew you'd come. Sooner or later. I knew."

Rick screams again. Crazily, instinctively, he pulls himself back-

ward and to his feet. The bum comes up with him, smoothly, as though they were two dancers in a neatly choreographed routine, one hand holding firmly onto Rick's wrist, the other reaching down to grab a bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 by the throat.

"Who appointed you *God*, mister? That's what I wanna know. Who the hell do you think you are, decidin' when it's time for *me* to die?" The words are loaded with so much violence that Rick feels them rather than hears them. Nothing makes sense, suddenly. Nothing is clear.

A part of Rick wants to offer some kind of explanation: about the power, the dog, the burden of silence, the whole mad succession of events leading up to this moment. It's a ridiculous thought, he knows, yet it persists, the parlor liberal inside him making one last pointless stand. His body, infinitely more sensible, tries once again to pull away, without success.

The wine bottle comes up in a strobing slow motion, a dance of light across its surface. Rick watches it, frozen. Something prickles at the boundaries of his conscious mind from somewhere beyond; he struggles, for a moment, to identify it . . .

*... and then it strikes him with horrible, infinite clarity. It is sound: a billowing, echoing cacaphony of sound, overwhelming in its density and texture and tone. It is the sound of inarticulate, goatlike braying; it is the sound of mocking, inhuman laughter; it is the sound of falling plaster, of a rat's triumphant chittering song.*

*It is the sound of a dog's dying howl. Gnashing teeth. Breaking bone.*

*It is the sound of a heart, wildly pounding. And pounding. And pounding . . .*

It is the last thing Rick will ever hear.

Then the bottle comes around in its deadly shimmering arc and smashes into the side of his head. Pieces of glass splinter off and imbed themselves in his soft face and temple. The world goes black and mercifully silent, yet he remains on his feet, staggering.

Rick has no idea that the bum lets go of his wrist. He doesn't feel himself falling backward, carried by his own weight and the force of the blow. He is not aware that his feet leave the ground. And as he rolls down the stairs, the loud crack of his neck breaking is not anything that he can hear.

They are standing in the doorway, a tight throng of five. The shortest woman, curiously in command, reads from her clip-

board. The others nod, poking at *their* clipboards with ballpoint pens, occasionally scribbling.

"This is Richard Hale," she reads aloud, and then proceeds to enumerate the damages. The list is long and quite specific. She also details the measures taken in emergency, his current critical status, and the nature of Richard Hale's life-support system. It takes about two minutes.

The nurse watches them leave. She is standing at the foot of Rick's bed, monitoring the flow of liquid that seeps into him from the IV needles. Or so it would seem.

Actually, she is staring at the broken man and waiting for the footsteps to recede. Slowly, then, she moves around the edge of the bed and gently sits down beside him, with something like love in her eyes.

She puts her hands to his bandaged head and listens. Like all the times before.

She is not surprised by what she hears.

"Go to sleep," she whispers.

"Go to sleep."

# Invitation to a Party

## by Jon Cohen

*She was only a baby-sitter, a mother's helper.  
So why did she insist the children call her "Mother"?*

"We should be back from the party by twelve, Miss Lordo. My husband will give you a ride home."

"Not Miss Lordo—Iris." Iris lifted her upper lip the way a dog will do just before it growls, smiled at Mrs. Sherwood. *Now tell me that the numbers for the police and fire department are by the phone.*

"And, God forbid you should need them, police, fire, emergency numbers, that sort of thing, are right by the phone. I guess there's really nothing else. Don't let them stay up too much longer." She pulled on her coat. "You're very good with children, I'm told."

"I have a way with them, yes. I think I hear your husband honking for you. You'd better go."

"You're right, Robert will have a fit if we're late." She knelt before her brood. "Who has a kiss for Mommy?" They gathered around and kissed her quickly, their lips skipping off her taut cheek. "You be nice to Miss Lordo."

"Iris. Goodnight, Mrs. Sherwood." Iris stood just out of view beside the window and watched the car drive away, then turned to the children. They crowded together, eyes wide. She marched past them into the kitchen and they scrambled after her, bunching up again when she stopped in front of the refrigerator. "Snacktime," she said, pulling out milk and juice. "Who knows where the cookies are?"

"I do," said one of them. "But we can't have any. We're not allowed." Iris stood looking at him, then shot across the kitchen and scooped him up, pushed her face close to his. "You and I are going on a cookie patrol," she said, flashing her dog-smile.

"Up there," he said, wriggling wildly and pointing to a cupboard above the sink. She put him down and he ran back to the startled little group crowding against the refrigerator.

"Until Mommy comes home I'm your mommy. Understand?" Chewing a cookie she shook the box at them. "So, snacktime." The oldest one moved toward the box with the apprehension of a squirrel

approaching a hand holding a peanut. "Go ahead, take it. Let's everybody come sit at the table. Juice or milk? Have as many cookies as you want." Each took one. "As many as you want, I said. Pass that box around again." The child nearest her eyed the others and grabbed a handful. They stared at his great pile. There was a giggle and another did the same. Chaos at the table, the children shrieked and snatched at the box, dizzy with this wonderful violation of the rules.

Cookies gone, they turned to Iris, eager for the next desecration. "Now what can we do, Iris?" She leered at her little converts. "Well, let's see. What aren't you usually allowed to do at night?"

"Play out in the yard." "Watch tv except weekends." "Ride bikes." "Pillow fights."

"We're never allowed to have pillow fights," said the oldest.

"Maybe Iris will let us." How far would she let them go?

"Bedtime," said Iris. The children grinned, unsure. "Bedtime," she repeated.

"We're never going to bed," they said, teasing her back.

"Bet you are," she said, cleaning up the mess on the table.

"Bet we're not," said the littlest, excited by this bold game.

Iris walked to the sink, paused, then whirled around. "I bet if you're not in bed in two minutes, I'll tell your mommy you ate all the cookies." She turned away from them and ran water over the dishes.

"You said we could, Iris. You said."

She kept her back to them. "I'll say, Mrs. Sherwood, those bad little children weren't out of my sight five minutes. When I came into the kitchen, there they were gobbling down cookies. The whole box, Mrs. Sherwood, the whole box.' That's just what I'll tell her if I count to three and you're still sitting at that table. One . . ."

The children darted out of the room in a squealing panic. Iris went to the bottom of the stairs and called up, "I'll come tuck you in after a while. Remember to say your prayers." She could hear them rushing around, whispering. Beds squeaked, a toilet flushed, one of them knocked something to the floor—a pile of books, maybe a heavy toy. "Sorry," yelled a voice down to her.

**I**t was a big house, so Iris wandered through several rooms before she found the living room. That's where she always began. *There's so much here, I'll never get to see it all.* She'd have to hurry. No, if I hurry it will ruin it. She'd have to be selective then, miss some rooms. Her favorite things were bureaus, dressers, and desks, because they had drawers. Pulling out a drawer, to Iris, was like opening a present;



there was always a secret surprise inside. Since they were so special she saved them for last.

First she did the furniture. Sometimes something good would slip down under a cushion. She tugged on the sofa cushions, but they were sewed on somehow. She pushed her hand between the cracks but didn't come up with anything. Nothing in any of the chairs, either; she felt herself growing warm with irritation. *They're probably never in here. People with big houses never go into most of their rooms, sit on any of their furniture. They just own things.* Anger knifed her and she suddenly looked up as if she could see into the children's rooms above her. They'd still be awake, maybe even sneaking in and out of each other's bedrooms. *Well, let them, so long as they keep quiet, don't spoil my night.* She gazed around the room, feeling better, and decided the coffee table would be next. Not as many knickknacks on it as she'd hoped. She picked up an onyx owl and caressed it. Then a small marble box, her fingers fluttering over its cool sides, not ready to open it. Holding it to her breast, she left the room, turned out the light behind her. She stood a moment in the doorway, then turned on the light again and walked back in. Now it was her living room. She put her box down next to her owl. Until she heard their car drive up, the house, everything, was hers.

*Time for the drawers, time to get inside the drawers.* She opened the top drawer of the small bureau. She slid her hand in, touched things, went in more deeply. Searching, feeling, she found an invitation to a dinner party and read it; then, returning it, she closed the drawer and walked away.

She paused. *Where did I put that dinner party invitation? I know, it's in the top drawer of the bureau.* She moved back to the bureau and sure enough, there it was, right where she had put it last week.

A sound from upstairs jolted her. Her eyes cut to the ceiling and down again to the invitation. It was Mrs. Sherwood's—the invitation was addressed to Mrs. Sherwood, not to her. The floor tilted. *Let me alone. This is my house tonight, mine.* She slipped to the floor, shut her eyes against the intrusion of the children, and lay there motionless, breathing in little controlled puffs. She recovered herself slowly. Then she was able to stand. The invitation was in her hand and she stared at it—it was addressed to her again. She smiled and nodded her head. *I must remember to accept.*

She moved the oak dresser across the room and stroked its hard surface. *Can I get inside?* It was easy. The dresser drawer had odd bits of silver on top, linen and several frayed antimacassars beneath. *Yes, I*

remember. Her grandmother had crocheted the antimacassars years and years ago. A sweet scent drifted toward her—the lavender sachet she had put in with the linen last winter. She lost herself inside the drawer. “Iris?” came a small voice behind her. She slammed it shut and whipped around. It was the skinny one. The child backed away. “Janey’s crying and won’t stop.” He ran out of the room. “I’ll come up,” Iris yelled after him. She looked around her, at the paintings, the furniture, the lamps and tables, at the room itself; all this, these things that were hers, that possessed her, changed and fell away. *I just want it for one night, for a few hours, and you won’t give it to me. You have all this, these rooms you never see, drawers you never open, children you leave with strangers.* She hugged herself to hold in her mounting fury. The room tilted, spun, and she with it. She ran into the kitchen. Whirling, she scattered silverware, searching for a knife. Janey was crying, Iris could hear her. *Stop stop stop, this is my house.* She rushed back into the living room, the knife high above the sofa, ready to slash at it. Then her arm dropped to her side. No.

“I’m coming, Janey, just a minute,” Iris called to her.

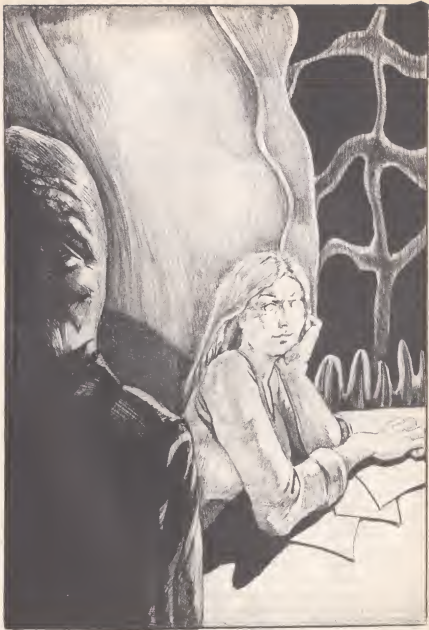
She returned to the kitchen to pick up her mess. The glasses they had used for their snack were dry now, and she put them back in the cupboard. *All right, children. Here I come.*

They could hear her walking up the stairs. It got quiet as she stood in the hall trying to decide where they were; the house was so big each child had its own room. They heard her moving again, opening a door. The bathroom. Another, the hall closet. Janey’s was next. Iris quietly shut the door and moved toward the bed, a hand behind her back. “Mommy has something for Janey. Something to stop the tears. Want to see?” Janey nodded, reached out. Iris showed her and Janey made a squeaking sound. “A cupcake I found just for you. Eat it quick and no crumbs in the bed.” When she finished, Iris wiped her mouth with a Kleenex and tucked her in.

Iris wandered down the hall, stopping in each of their rooms, telling stories, or tickling them, or reading out loud until they fell asleep. The last child was the skinny one. He was sitting in bed hunched against his pillows. “Don’t be afraid of Mommy,” said Iris.

“You’re not my mommy,” he said, watching her. Iris tilted her head as if she didn’t understand. “Don’t be afraid,” she said again, moving toward him.

When she came out the house was hers. She went into the bathroom and washed her hands, lathering and rinsing until she felt clean. *Where is my towel . . . oh, of course.* She reached for the one



with MOTHER embroidered on it.

*Robert will be coming back soon. I'd better get ready.* She hurried into her bedroom to find something to wear, then decided what she had on would be good enough. *I should put on some makeup, though, comb my hair.* She sat at her dresser, found a lipstick, and pouted her lips in the mirror. The photograph beside the mirror: she leaned closer to look at it. *Robert and the children at the beach. It was so hot that day I had to beg them to stand still while I took the picture. So hot, the sun glaring off the sand and the water making them squint.* Iris picked up the picture and held it in the lamplight, squinted back at them, puzzled. The skinny one on the end, he didn't belong to her—"you're not my mommy"—what was he doing there? A playmate met on the beach, a neighbor's child? She couldn't remember. A car pulled into the driveway; Iris heard the gravel popping under the tires. *Robert's back from picking her up.* She looked again at the strange boy, couldn't remember, and placed the photograph beside the mirror. *Robert will have a fit if we're late.* She ran down the hall. They came in the back door just as Iris reached the bottom of the stairs. "Let me get my coat and I'll be right there," she called.

"All right, I'm ready to go," she said, rushing into the kitchen. She smiled at Robert, then turned to the woman standing beside him, looking her over, decided she'd do. "The children are asleep," Iris said to her. "There's really nothing else to tell you. The numbers for the police and fire department are by the phone." The woman appeared confused, shrugged her shoulders at Robert as Iris headed for the door. "Goodnight," Iris called behind her. "Come on, Robert, we don't want to be late." Frowning, Robert shrugged back at his wife, then followed Iris out to the car.

Mrs. Sherwood hurried upstairs. Miss Lordo's bizarre chatter had bothered her; *she'll not take care of my children again.* She looked into the first room. Janey was asleep and Mrs. Sherwood gave her a kiss. She grew calmer as she moved quickly down the hall kissing each sleeping child. She could hear the car pulling out of the driveway as she opened the last door.

"What's that...?" Robert stopped the car to listen.

"What's what? I didn't hear anything," said Iris. "Robert, don't worry, everything's fine. We have a very good sitter." From her side of the car Iris could see Mrs. Sherwood struggling to open the upstairs bedroom window. "Yes, very good, and she has a real way with children, I'm told. Now, come on, Robert, let's go or we'll be late for the party."

# And Now I'm Waiting

by Richard Matheson

*His imagination was downright satanic—  
and more vivid than anybody realized.*

Mary let me in as soon as I rang the bell. She must have been waiting in the hallway.

I'd never in my life seen my sister look so unhappy. Sorrow had woven lines into her face unnatural for her age. And although neatness was an ingrained habit, not even her hair was combed. It fell around her shoulders in tangled brown swirls.

I leaned over to kiss her cheek and felt how cool and dry it was. "Give me your things," she said.

I took off my hat and coat and handed them to her. She put them in the hall closet. I noticed how her once-straight shoulders were now bowed. I grew taut with anger at what he'd done to her.

Then a shiver ran through me. I realized it was almost as cold in the house as outside. I rubbed my hands together.

Then she was beside me.

"Mary," I said, and put my arms around her. I felt her shudder.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "I can't bear it anymore."

"Where is he?" I asked.

She hung on to me for a moment. Then she pulled away and looked toward the study.

"Alone?" I asked.

Her eyes avoided mine. She nodded once.

I took her hand again. "It'll be all right."

She lifted my hand and pressed it against her cheek. Then she turned away.

"Will you wait here?" I asked.

"All right, David," she said.

I watched her walk to a chair against the stairs. She sat down and folded her hands on her lap.

I turned and walked to the study door, stood before it a second. Then, taking a deep breath, I knocked.

"What is it?" he called impatiently.

"David," I said.

It was silent. Finally he said, "Oh, come in."

Richard was standing in front of the fireplace, a giant of a man. His back was turned to me. He was staring into the crackling flames, an aura of light outlining his powerful form, casting shadows of him on the walls and ceiling.

"What is it?" he said, without turning.

"Mary told me I'd find you here," I said.

"Clever," he said. "Is that all?"

I shut the door behind me.

He turned as I walked toward him, a familiar expression of arrogance on his handsome features.

"So Mary told you I was in here, did she?" he said.

I sat down on the couch facing him.

"I want to talk to you," I said.

He looked down at me, then turned away.

"Talk about what?" he said.

I twisted around and turned on a lamp on the table behind me.

"I don't want that lamp on," he said.

"I want to see what you look like."

He turned around again. I felt a shudder run down my back as his icy eyes looked into mine. His lips drew back in a contemptuous smile.

"Do I pass?" he said. "Are you satisfied?"

"You're not as I'd expected," I said.

"Or as Mary led you to expect."

"She said only—"

"I can imagine what she said," he interrupted. "Turn off that lamp."

I reached back and turned it off. Once more his shadow billowed on the walls and ceiling.

"You look ill," I told him.

"Come twenty miles to tell me that?"

He stretched out his arms and rested them across the top of the fireplace. For a brief moment, I had the sensation that I was watching

some ancient monarch in his hunting lodge.

"No, I didn't come twenty miles to tell you that," I said. "You know why I came."

"She sent for you," he said.

My fingers shook as I took out my cigarettes and lit one. I hoped he wouldn't notice.

"That's beside the point," I said. "Suppose you tell me what's wrong."

"You haven't answered my question," he said.

"Yes," I said, "she sent for me. I'm surprised she waited so long."

"Surprised?"

"Mary is about to have a nervous breakdown," I said.

"Oh," he said, "I see."

"You don't see at all," I said. "You don't *care* at all."

"Care!" he cried in a burst of temper. "How many nights have I sat with her trying to explain, trying to reason with a . . . block of wood!" He clenched his fists. "But who can explain that—"

He broke off the sentence and walked to a shadowy portion of the room. I heard him drop into a chair.

"That what?" I asked.

"Why don't *you* finish it?" he said.

"That you've been constantly unfaithful," I said.

I half expected him to leap out of the shadows. I tensed myself for it.

When he chuckled, my body jerked with the unexpected reaction.

"Unfaithful," he said.

"Is that all you have to say?" I asked.

I heard him stand abruptly, felt his baneful eyes on the back of my head. Then he walked around the couch and stood before the fireplace again. He clasped his hands in back of him.

"Unfaithful," he said, "Yes. And no."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" I asked.

"If you wish."

"See here, Richard!" I flared. "This is no—"

"—no laughing matter," he cut in. "This is grim business. This is serious. This is bad. This is . . . laughable."

He chuckled and stood looking at me in amusement.

"You know," he said, "I believe I'll tell you."

"If there's any decency in—"

"Decency?" He snorted. "What a slapstick word." He turned away and leaned against the fireplace, resting his forehead against his arms.

He looked into the flames for a long time in silence. He seemed to have forgotten me. I coughed. He stirred and shifted on his feet.

"You recall my last book?" he asked.

"What of it?"

"Do you recall the character of Alice?"

"What about her?" I said impatiently, certain that he was evading the issue.

"It is with Alice," he said, "that I've been, as you so quaintly put it, unfaithful."

"Very funny," I said.

He turned and looked at me coldly.

"I should have expected this from you," he said. "Why did I think for a moment that you could possibly understand?"

"Are you serious?" I asked.

He barked a scornful laugh. "You fool! Can't you see that?"

He turned away and took deep breaths. Then he spoke as though he were speaking to himself.

"Alice became so real," he said, "that Mary believed in her existence. As a person. An actual person. And this is my unfaithfulness."

He looked over his shoulder at me.

"But why do I even mention this to you?" he said. "Why should I dare hope to penetrate that skull of yours?"

"You're lying," I said. "I know my sister better than that."

"Do you?" he said.

"It's a lie."

"Oh, go home," he said.

"Listen—"

"Did you hear me!" he shouted.

I sat without moving. He stood glaring at me, hands twitching at his sides. Finally he turned away.

"If it's true," I said, "explain it."

"I told you," he said in a bored voice.

"I want the truth," I said. "Mary is losing her mind and I want to know why."

He didn't move. I couldn't tell whether he was listening or not.

"I know you," I went on. "You don't care about her. You never did. You've always expected her to live on scraps from you; well, that much she expected. She was prepared to share you with your work . . . and yourself."

I stood.

"But this isn't intangible," I said angrily. "This is outright and cruel.



And I want to know about it."

He sighed, then spoke with that shifting of mood that made him so inexplicable. His voice was almost gentle.

"You *are* a child," he said. "Impossibly and irremediably a child."

"Are you going to *tell* me?"

He turned with a look of unconcern on his face.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "Why don't you ask Mary whom I've been consorting with?"

I looked at him.

"Go ahead," he said. "Are you afraid?"

"All right," I said. "I will."

At the door I paused, about to say something threatening. I was afraid to say it. I went out.

I was about to close the door when I heard his voice. At first I thought he was calling after me. I turned around.

He wasn't talking to me.

"She is five foot seven," he said. "Her hair is thick and golden. Her eyes are green jewels. They sparkle in the firelight. Her skin is white and clear.

"She is long and sleek. Tawny as a cat that stretches on the hearth rug and rakes its nails across it. Her teeth are sparkling white. Her—"

His voice broke off, and I knew that he'd seen the half-open door.

I turned. Mary was standing beside me, staring at the doorway.

"Let's go in," I said.

She didn't say anything. I put my arm around her and pushed open the door.

"No," she said.

"Please."

Richard watched us dispassionately as we walked to the couch. I turned on the lamp.

"And how are *you*, sweetheart?" Richard asked.

She lowered her eyes. I sat beside her and took her hand.

Richard turned his back to us and looked at the fire again.

"Well," he said, "what now?"

"We're going to get this matter thrashed out," I said.

Mary tried to get up, but I held her back.

"We have to settle this now," I told her.

"We have to settle this now," mocked Richard.

"Damn you!" I cried.

"David, don't," Mary said. "It never helps."

Richard turned around and looked at her with a laugh.

"You know that, don't you?" he said. "At least we've managed to teach you that much."

"Mary," I said, "who is Alice?"

She closed her eyes. "Ask my husband," she said.

"Why, surely," Richard said. "Alice is a character in my last novel."

"That's a lie," she said. I could barely hear her voice.

"Eh?" Richard said. "What's that? Speak up, my dear."

"She said it was a lie!" I cried.

He moved his gaze to me.

"Control yourself," he warned.

I started to get up, but he quickly stepped over and closed his hands upon my shoulders.

"Don't forget yourself," he said. "You're such a little fellow. It would be a pity to break your neck."

"Tell us the truth," I said.

He pulled away his hands and went back to the fireplace.

"The truth, the truth," he chanted, "why do people want the truth? It never pleases them."

He ran a hand through his hair. Then he blew out a tired breath.

"Listen," he said, as though making one last effort, "Mary is the victim of a delusion."

I glanced aside. Mary had raised her head and was looking at him.

"Try to understand," he said. "The girl Alice is a fictional character. When my wife started to see her, well—" He shrugged. "She saw only a phantom, a figment of—"

"Why are you lying?" Mary cried. "I saw her in this very room with you!"

It was no use.

"Come on," I said, "I'll take you upstairs."

"Please," she whispered.

As we were leaving, I noticed him turning off the lamp again.

"Good night!" he called. "Pleasant dreams!"

I took her upstairs and made sure that she locked the bedroom door from the inside.

When I returned to the study, Richard was stretched out on the couch. I turned on the lamp.

"Leave it off," he said.

"I want it on."

He threw himself on his side. "Oh, go home, will you? Get the hell

out of here and leave me alone."

I went around to the front of the couch. He sat up.

"Did you hear what I said?" he threatened.

"I want the truth."

He jumped up, and his powerful hands closed on my arms. "I said go!" he yelled.

My face must have gone blank with fear. His face suddenly relaxed and he shoved me down on the couch.

"Oh, why bother?" he said, going back to the fireplace. "All right, I'll tell you everything. I'd like to see your face when you hear it."

He rested one arm on the fireplace mantel and turned to me.

"In my first book there was a character named Erick. I don't expect you remember him. He was my first good character. Out of words I built flesh and blood and living force."

A look of recollection crossed his face.

"Erick came in here one night while I was writing. He sat down where you're sitting. Right there. We talked. He spoke in the way I had made him speak. We had a hell of a time. We discussed all the other people in the book. After a while, some of them came in, too. The ones that I had realized well."

"You're lying," I said.

"Lying! You idiot! You wanted your damn truth, didn't you? Well, here it is! Are you too ignorant to understand it?"

He glared at me, trying to control his fury.

"It went on like that," he continued. "And then I'd think, 'I want them to return to their spectral homes.' And soon they started to make excuses, and before long I was alone again. Not sure I hadn't dreamed it all."

He turned and was silent for a long time. Then a quiet laugh rumbled in his chest.

"I wrote a second book," he said, "but I was too anxious. I didn't know my people. They never lived."

He turned to me with a look of elation on his face.

"Then I wrote my third book. And *Alice*. She breathed and she lived. I could see her and know her. I could sit and look at her beauty. I could drink in the fragrance of her hair, run my fingers through it, caress her long smooth limbs, kiss those warm, exciting—"

He caught himself and looked at me.

"Do you understand?" he said. "Can you possibly appreciate this?"

A look of childlike desire to *make* me understand filled his face.

"Can't you visualize it?" he said excitedly. "She was alive, David."

*Alive!* Not just a character on a printed page. She was real. You could touch her."

"Then Mary saw—" I said.

"Yes. Mary saw. One night I summoned Alice. She was right here, unclothed, standing in the heat, painted over with flickering gold, an incensing blood-pounding creature . . ."

He bared his teeth.

"And then *she* came, my precious wife. She saw Alice. She cried out and shut the door and ran to hide her head. I sent Alice away. I ran and caught Mary on the stairs. I brought her down and showed her there was no one. She didn't believe me, of course. She thought Alice had gone out through that window over there."

He laughed loudly.

"Even though it was snowing outside!" he said.

His laughter stopped.

"You're the first I've told," he said. "And I'm only telling you because I have to share the wonder of it. I'd never meant to speak of it. Why should the sorcerer give away his sorcery, the magician market his wand? These things are mine, all mine."

He told me to turn off the lamp. Without a word I reached back and turned it off.

"Yes, David," he said. "My wife saw Alice."

He threw back his head and laughed again.

*"But not the others,"* he said.

"Others?" A feeling of unreality pressed in on me.

"Yes!" he said, "the others! Do you know what happened after Alice came alive? No, of course you don't."

He leaned forward.

"After I created Alice, everything I imagined came to life. There was no struggle. I imagined a cat sleeping before the fireplace, I'd close my eyes and, opening them, I'd see it there, its bushy coat warm and crackling, its nose pink from the heat.

*"Everything, David! Everything I wanted. Oh, what people I filled this house with! I had madmen and harlots embracing in the hallways. I'd send Mary away and have my house bursting its seams with demons' revelry.*

*"I held ancient debauches in the front hall; had a torrent of red wine pouring down the stairway. I made altars and sacrificed young maidens; the floorboards were soaked with their blood. I held shrieking, howling orgies that filled my house with masses of lust-mad people*

writhing like worms. Everything living—*living!*"

He paused and caught his breath.

"Sometimes I felt sad and dismal," he said. "I filled my house with ugly, sorrowful people, silent people. I walked among them patting the shoulder of a clay-dripping corpse, chatting idly with a ghoul."

"You're insane," I muttered.

It seemed to relax him. He closed his eyes and turned away.

"Oh, God," he said wearily, "why do people always say the things I expect? Why can't they be a little original?"

He turned at the sound of my standing.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"I'm taking Mary away," I said.

"Good," he said.

I stared at him. I couldn't believe it. "Is that all she means to you?" I asked.

"Make up your mind," he said.

I backed toward the door.

"Everything you've told me is a lie," I said. "There aren't any people. You imagined it all. There isn't anything but the ugliness you've brought into my sister's life."

I jumped back. He whirled and before I could get out he had rushed over to me and grabbed my wrists in a steel grip. He dragged me back to the couch and pushed me down on it.

"She's five foot seven," he hissed. "Her hair is thick and golden. Her eyes are green jewels. They sparkle in the firelight. Her skin is white and clear."

A feeling of revulsion crawled over me.

"She is wearing a blue dress," he said. "It has jewels on the right shoulder."

I tried to get up. He shoved me back and, reaching out one arm, grabbed me by the hair.

"She's holding a book," he snarled. "What was the name of the book you gave your mother? On her birthday long ago?"

I gaped at him. His fingers wrenched hair off my scalp. White pain flared.

"What's the name?" he demanded.

"*Green Roses*," I said.

He let go of me and I slumped on the couch.

"That's the book," he said, "that Alice will be holding when she comes in this room."

He faced the door.

"Alice," he said. "Come upstairs, Alice. One step at a time. Now open the kitchen door. That's fine. Don't trip. That's it. Walk across the floor. Never mind the lights. Push open the swinging door in the dining room."

I caught my breath.

I heard a woman's heels clicking on the dining room floor. I pushed up and scuffed backwards into the shadows. I bumped into a chair and stood there.

The heels came closer.

"Come right in here, Alice," Richard said. "Closer and closer and—"

The door flew open and the shadow of a woman streamed across the floor.

She came in, exactly as Richard had described her.

Holding a book in her right hand.

She put it on the table behind the couch and walked up to him. She slid her red-nailed hands over his shoulders and kissed him.

"I've missed you," she said in a lazy, sensuous voice.

"What have you been doing?" he asked.

She ran a finger slowly across his cheek, an amused laugh bubbling in her throat.

"But you already know, darling," she said.

He clutched her shoulders. A look of rage crossed his face. Then he pulled her against him and kissed her violently. I gaped at them like a spying boy.

Their lips parted, and one of her hands slid like a serpent into his hair. Richard looked over her shoulder at me, a smile on the corners of his mouth.

"My dear," he said, "I'd like you to meet David."

"Why, of course," she said, without turning, as though she already knew I was there.

"That's him cowering in shadows," Richard said.

She turned and looked at me. "Do come out of the shadows, David," she said.

She reached over the couch and put on the lamp. I flinched and pushed back against the chair.

"Frightened?" Alice said.

"Bashful," Richard said.

I tried to speak. The words caught in my throat.

"Did you say something?" Alice asked.

"Monster!" I whispered.

A look of mild surprise crossed her face.

"Why, David," she said.

She turned to Richard and held out her arms to the side as though offering herself for inspection.

"Am I a monster, darling?" she asked.

Richard laughed and pulled her against him. He kissed her neck. "My beautiful gold-haired monster," he said.

She left his embrace and came to me. I cringed back. She reached out one hand, and I felt the warm palm on my cheek. I shivered.

She leaned toward me. I could smell her perfume. I made a sound of fright. Her warm breath touch me, and I drew back with a shudder. "No," I said.

Richard laughed. "That's a new one. The first rebuff of your career."

Alice shrugged and walked away from me. "I must say he's not the friendliest person I've met." She gloated at Richard. "Like the Duke, for instance."

His smile disappeared.

"Don't talk about him," he said.

"But darling," she said mockingly, "you created him. How can you hate your own creation?"

He grabbed one of her wrists and squeezed it until the color drained from her face. She made no outcry.

"Don't ever try to fool me," he gasped.

"We'll see," she said.

Then her face relaxed. She looked over her shoulder.

"Oh, David," she said, "I brought you a book."

I stumbled to the table, felt their eyes on me. I reached out and picked up the book.

*Green Roses.*

My fingers went dead. The book slipped from them and thudded on the rug. It opened with a flutter, and I saw the title page. I knew the words by heart, for I had written them.

*To Mommy on her birthday. Love, David.*

"True," I muttered.

"Of course," I heard him say.

I kept backing up until I felt a chair against my legs. I sank down and stared dumbly at them, watched him caress her. The room seemed to whirl about me.

"This is worth the hours of waiting," he was saying. "It makes the torture seem like a just penance."

"Torture?" she said in an amused tone.

He dug his fingers into the tresses of her hair. He drew her close, their lips almost touching.

"You don't know how much of me went into your creation," he said. "You're not just another woman to me. You're more than anyone in the world. Because you're a part of me."

I couldn't bear to listen any longer. I pushed up and stumbled for the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To get my sister," I said.

"No," he said.

I turned around. "But you said—"

"I've changed my mind," he told me.

"Where is she?" Alice asked.

He glanced at her. "Why do you want to know?"

"I want to go and talk to her."

"No," he said. "You can't."

He was looking at me and didn't notice the look of hate that flickered over her face.

"Sit down," he told me.

"No."

"Sit down," he repeated, "or I'll destroy your sister."

I stared at him. Then, without a word, I went back to the chair.

"I want to see her," Alice said.

He grasped her arm. "I said no," he said. "You do what I tell you."

"Always?" she asked.

"Or your life is ended!" he cried.

He released her.

"Now you must go," he said. "You'll kiss me once and go back to your secret place. Until I want you again."

An emotionless smile raised her red lips. Then she leaned forward and kissed him.

"Goodbye," she said.

He pulled her close and looked into her eyes.

"Remember," he said. "As I say."

"Goodbye."

She moved away from him and I heard the door close behind her. The sound of her heels faded.

Richard turned back to the fireplace.

He stayed that way. Slowly a hope that I could escape grew in me. I started to take off my shoes. If I could only get to the door without



him seeing me . . . I stood.

My eyes never left him. His body seemed to waver in the firelight. I stepped slowly across the rug. One foot after another.

My hand was on the doorknob.

"A ten-foot cobra is climbing up my bedroom door," Richard said. "It is going to kill my wife."

I stared at him.

*He hadn't even turned around.*

I ran to him and clutched his arm. "Richard!"

Suddenly, from upstairs, a scream pierced the air.

Richard's head jerked around. A look of horror filled his face.

"No," he said.

He tore from my hold and rushed to the door. He flung it open and ran across the hall. I heard him cry out:

"It is gone! It has disappeared!"

I ran after him up the stairs.

I found him kneeling over her.

It was Alice—dead. Her cheeks were puffed, her eyes wide and staring. Under her right eye were two red punctures.

Richard was looking at her in disbelief. He reached down and touched her face with trembling fingers, felt for her heartbeat.

I looked at Alice's feet. She had taken off her shoes so Richard would not hear her on the stairs.

He picked her up, his face a blank. He started down the stairs and took her into the study.

I turned quickly.

Mary was standing in the bedroom doorway, looking down at the study.

I grabbed her hand. "We've got to go!" I said.

She didn't speak as I half dragged her down the long stairway and out the front door. I put her in my car.

"Drive to the highway and wait for me."

"But—"

"Don't argue," I said.

She stared at me for a moment. Then she turned and drove down the path. I watched the car roll onto the road. I turned and ran back into the house.

I found him kneeling beside the couch on which he had placed Alice's body.

He was holding her hand and stroking it. All the arrogance was

gone. He looked as though he thought she was going to wake up in a moment.

I went over to him and put my hand on his shoulder. His head snapped back and he looked up at me.

"You've got to get rid of her," I said.

"The house is burning," he said.

The suddenness made me jump backwards. The walls had burst into flame. The drapes began to curl, the room abruptly thick with smoke.

"Richard!" I cried. "Stop it!"

He didn't answer. He only stared at Alice's puffed, white face and stroked her hand.

I knew it was hopeless. I rushed for the door. Just before I reached it, a sheet of flame blocked the way.

I whirled and looked at him.

He didn't want me to leave.

I coughed as the choking fumes entered my throat. Turning, I ran for the window. Flames covered it.

I jerked a small table from the floor and hurled it at the window. It splintered through. I dived for the opening.

"No!" I heard him yell. It made me jolt to a halt.

"You *can't* go!" he cried. His words broke off into a peal of laughter.

"You can't stop me!" I cried.

He didn't say anything, just smiled and sank across her body.

Suddenly I knew why I couldn't go.

*Because I'm one of his characters, too.*

And now I'm waiting.

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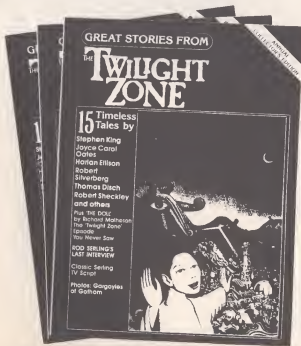


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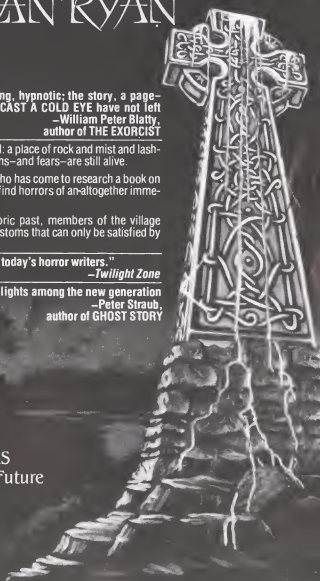
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